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The
EVOLUTION
of HORROR
COMEDY

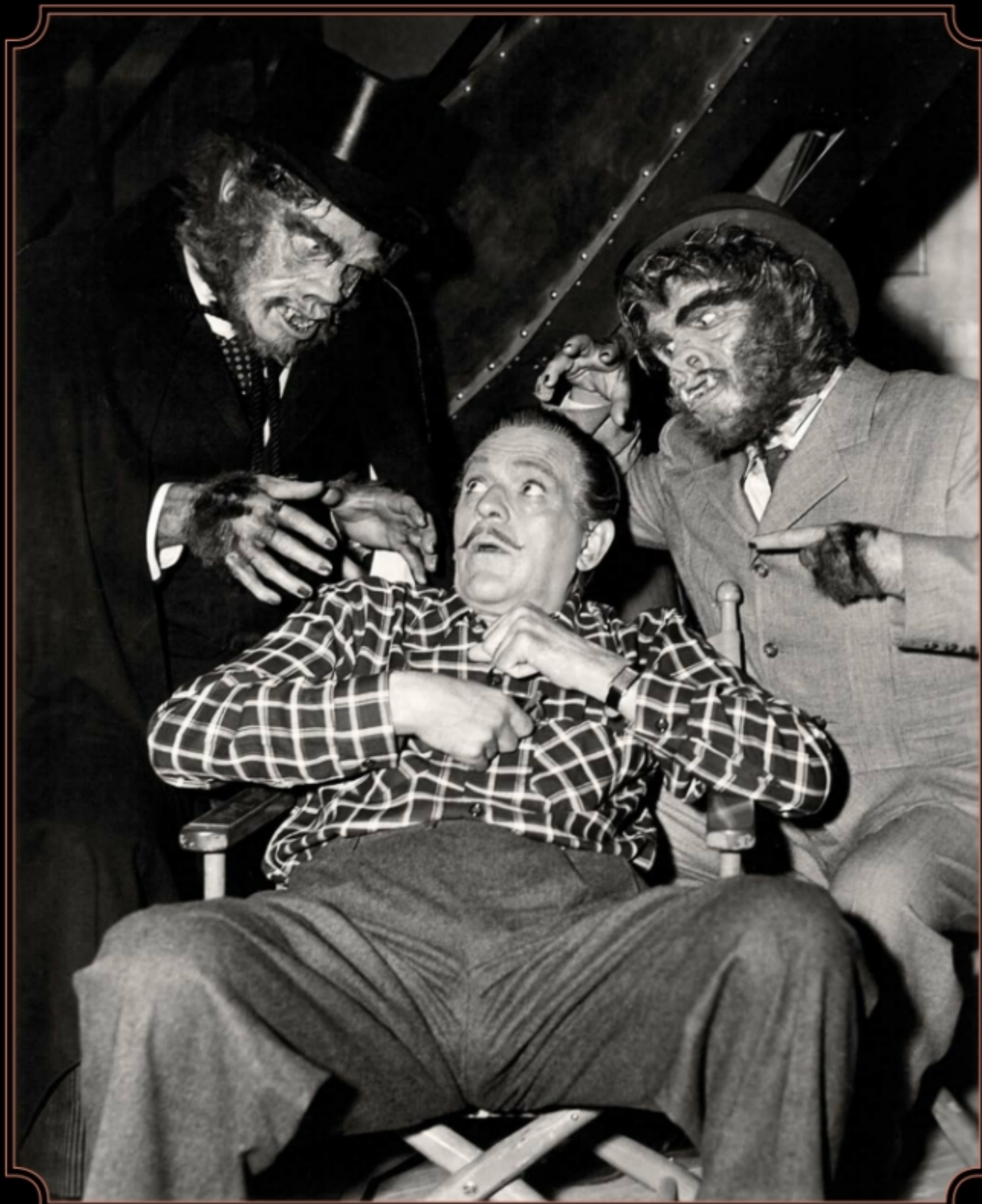
Joe Dante Revisits
GREMLINS 2

Canada's Finest:

Astron-6 · Jason Eisener
Adam Wingard on YOU'RE NEXT
Ben Wheatley's SIGHTSEERS

Nigel Wingrove on JESS FRANCO





Bud and Lou menace Boris Karloff in a publicity shot for *Abbott and Costello Meet Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1953)

DIABOLIQUE

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EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

Max Weinstein
max@horrorunlimited.com

WEBSITE EDITOR

Ken Hanley
ken@horrorunlimited.com

PUBLISHER AND ARTISTIC DIRECTOR

Dima Ballin
dima@horrorunlimited.com

DIRECTOR OF MARKETING

Greg Petaludis
greg@horrorunlimited.com

SALES AND ADVERTISING

Jackie Goldstein
jackie@horrorunlimited.com

WEBCAST HOST

Stephen Slaughter Head
steve@horrorunlimited.com

FRONT COVER PAINTING

Matthew Therrien

HORROR UNLIMITED

150-50 Coolidge Avenue
Briarwood NY 11432-1622
USA

Phone: (718) 658-5020
Websites: DiaboliqueMagazine.com
HorrorUnlimited.com
Facebook: /diaboliquemagazine
Twitter: @DiaboliqueMag

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Horror for the Connoisseur

Table of Contents

6 GRUE ROMANCE

Ben Wheatley shares some insight with Colin McCracken on the carnage of *Sightseers*

12 BLOOD ALCOHOL CONTENT

Colin McCracken explores the pub-set Irish horror-comedy *Grabbers*, with words from writer Kevin Lehane and FX specialist Shaune Harrison

16 SIDE-SPLITTING: THE EVOLUTION OF HORROR-COMEDY

Ken Hanley charts the social, artistic and commercial history of the horror-comedy subgenre, with words from Doug Benson, Alex Winter and Lloyd Kaufman

28 DANTE: 2 STUDIOS: 0

Joe Dante revisits *Gremlins 2: The New Batch* with Max Weinstein

36 HEALING THE WOUNDS: UNDER THE SKIN OF JESS FRANCO

Redemption Films founder Nigel Wingrove pays tribute to exploitation giant Jess Franco

44 THE ANTI-ESTABLISHMENT ESTABLISHMENT

Canadian filmmaking collective Astron-6 considers their brushes with censorship, production woes and (sort-of) new-found notoriety

48 HE'S NEXT

Ken Hanley speaks with horror's emerging force, *You're Next* director Adam Wingard

54 RAISED BY FEAR

Poster artist Akiko Stehrenberger reveals her haunted past to Michele Galgana

56 CANADIAN WITH A CAMERA

Jason Eisener sits down with Ken Hanley to consider his rise from faux-trailers to anthology franchises

61 FILM REVIEW: YOU'RE NEXT

Our early review of Adam Wingard's home invasion shocker

WHEN WAS THE first time you can recall laughing at something horrible? For me, it was when, after losing his arms in a duel to a swipe of the sword of Graham Chapman's King Arthur, John Cleese's Black Knight spouted geysers of blood in *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*. It may not have been the first time I'd laughed at something horrible, technically—but when looking back on my childhood film-watching experiences, every memorable moment seems like "the first." Although *Holy Grail* isn't an overt attempt at horror-comedy hybridity, its Black Knight bit is most certainly a gateway drug of sorts; its juxtaposition of splatter and Cleese's deadpan refusal to accept the ramifications of his injury ("It's only a flesh wound!") seemed to nudge me to consider the hilarity of excess, and prepared me to seek out more excess for years to come. My journey from *Monty Python* to *Evil Dead* and beyond didn't happen overnight, but said journey's forward movement was inevitable—much like the mutation of the horror-comedy hybrid itself.

The extensive horror-comedy coverage that lies before you is the brainchild of my former co-editors Scott Feinblatt and Brandon Kisters and me—an endeavor that initially began as an attempt to encompass as many classic titles of the sub-genre as possible. As you'll see, the idea remained intact. But things change. In addition to my esteemed colleagues leaving *Diabolique* to pursue other ventures, soon after, the genre community suffered the sudden loss of exploitation icon Jesús "Jess" Franco. So we resolved to do what many of the filmmakers covered in these pages make a living of doing—we improvised, incorporating Ken Hanley's sweeping historical overview of horror-comedy up to the present day to go hand-in-hand with Nigel Wingrove's deeply personal remembrance of the late Franco.

Accordingly, our cover this time around, a beautifully painted rendering by artist/illustrator Matthew Therrien, reflects "the journey"—that notion of unpredictable change. Through its positioning of the black-and-white era of Abbott

and Costello's meetings with the Universal monsters; its foregrounding of Edgar Wright, Simon Pegg and Nick Frost's game-changing "Blood & Ice Cream" films; and its sprinkling of iconic characters old and new, Matt's cover tells the story of the not-so-linear, yet progressive evolution of the horror-comedy hybrid and its key players.

While we're on the subject of "the journey," here's a bit about mine: It was only three years ago that I showed up to an interview for an internship with *Fangoria* with nothing more than a handful of blog posts to my name, sweating bullets. Landing that gig helped me rediscover, through my film writing, a genre I had loved since time immemorial, but whose culturally important representations I had yet to actively engage with. It's safe to say it still hasn't set in that I'm now *Diabolique's* Editor-in-Chief, but considering this magazine's approach is all about active, critical engagement with horror's many facets, I'm chomping at the bit. You'll hear more from me—be it musing, observing, ranting or raving—in this section in issues to come.

Inside issue 17, our resident Irishman, Colin McCracken, imparts a uniquely regional perspective on two foreign horror-comedies—the British *Sightseers* (from *Kill List* director Ben Wheatley) and the Irish FX spectacle *Grabbers*. The incomparable Joe Dante was also kind enough to look back with us at *Gremlins 2: The New Batch*, his criminally overlooked sequel to *Gremlins* whose theatrical release date preceded the birth of yours truly by 14 days ("You really missed out!" he says). And if all this funny business isn't your thing, you might turn to find a bizarre revelation from award-winning poster artist Akiko Stehrenberger in her chat with Izzy Galgana.

Like every issue we've offered since our inception, this one holds fast to the belief that nostalgia and forward thinking are two great tastes that go great together. So let's break it in, shall we?

Max Weinstein
Editor-in-Chief

Diabolique

Letters

"You take a very classy approach to the magazine. Here is what I think:

- 1.) Perfect blend of old and new
- 2.) Articles well researched
- 3.) Photos are not typical recycled shots
- 4.) Cover artwork and layout is always good
- 5.) Paper and printing good
- 6.) Writing is intelligent and respectful
- 7.) Limited Ads
- 8.) Price totally fair
- 9.) No 'headbanger' attitude
- 10.) Does not focus on gore (This should probably be #1)

As a filmmaker, I'd love to see more behind-the-scenes 'how they did it' type articles. I also love reading about lesser known writers and films, and reviews of other publications, books, CDs, etc. are nice."

- John Terendy
Chicago, Illinois

Thanks, John. As much as some of us in the *Diabolique* family love our gore, gore for gore's sake isn't something you'll typically find here. The best depictions of violence carry purpose and meaning outside of marketing value. Keep your eyes peeled for the things you'd "love to see more" of in our next issue—you'll be pleasantly surprised!

"I discovered your magazine's Peter Cushing Centennial Issue at the Barnes and Noble on East 54th street (in the Citigroup Center) and I haven't been able to put it down! Shout out to fellow horror fans and fellow Queens residents—it's great to know that such a well written, polished, and illustrated magazine is printed and published not far from where I live. All the articles and contributors are great; I really love Jonathan Rigby's writing. As a Peter Cushing and Hammer movie fan, it's great to read about all the great Cushing roles and hopefully discover new ones as well. I found the photo on page 56 of Cushing with the model houses really interesting. Was model making or making doll houses one of his hobbies? I'm looking forward to issue 17 coming out soon."

- Daniel Savino
Bellerose, NY

Hey Daniel! Cushing was a member of the Model Soldier Society. In his spare time, he

collected and built over 5,000 individual pieces that comprised his own personal "army," and even played with them according to rules laid out in a game designed by H.G. Wells called Little Wars. Model houses, then, were probably his logical next step.

"As I hungrily devoured the contents of the latest issue of *Diabolique*, it struck me why I find it such a satisfying part of my life. One word: balance. *Diabolique* is respectful of the past as well as aware of and savvy about modern genre films. Your coverage of Peter Cushing's career is very well done without simply being a rehash of all that came before, and the article about Nigel Wingrove's unique work acknowledges life beyond Hammer and Karloff. The blending of old and new are done in such a way that the articles—though independent—create a common thread of sorts. Those not familiar with a covered topic can easily drift from page to page exposing themselves to new, exciting things in addition to the comfortable, established themes. Your photos are obviously chosen for their quality and, best of all, their unfamiliarity. As a lifelong horror fan, I have cast my eyes across the same beloved pictures in other magazines for decades. *Diabolique* gives me something new to look at—a thrill of discovery I've missed for many years. I see the magazine as a dynamic blend of *Famous Monsters of Film-land* (the standard by which all we 'monster kids' measure a magazine!) and *Cinefantastique* (which intelligently covered modern genre films with a fine sense of graphics). I remember the thrill I used to experience whenever the latest edition of *Famous Monsters* arrived at my door, and have found myself reliving that glorious feeling when the Horror Unlimited envelope arrives! Classic films, new films, literature (the Stoker issue was grand!) and reviews—quite simply put, I love the magazine. It's a quality publication with content that assures each issue's preservation in my archives. To me, that's the mark of greatness!"

- Rick Squires
Rochester, NY


Rick: Thanks for "getting" what we're aiming for. *Diabolique* is always evolving, but its one constant is our reliance on a variety of perspectives—old, new, foreign, domestic, etc. That includes your perspective as well.



STUDIES IN TERROR

LANDMARKS OF HORROR CINEMA
BY JONATHAN RIGBY

Acclaimed critic and broadcaster **JONATHAN RIGBY** brings his trademark wit and insight to bear on **130** of the **KEY MOMENTS** in **SCREEN HORROR**. With a foreword by **MARK GATISS**.

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GRUE ROMANCE

In Ben Wheatley's *Sightseers*, the couple that slays together stays together.

MODERN LIFE IS rubbish and we all need a break sometimes, so where better to cast away the worries and woes of everyday life than the English countryside? Such is the intention of Chris and Tina, portrayed by Steve Oram and Alice Lowe respectively, in Ben Wheatley's new red-tainted black comedy, *Sightseers*.

Wheatley is best known for his previous films, *Down Terrace* (2009), and the intense and resonant *Kill List* (2010), which he wrote with his wife, Amy Jump. *Sightseers*, however, was initially scripted by Lowe and Oram, starting life as a short film. "I knew them already, because I'd worked with them before in TV", says Wheatley, "so when I was offered it, I was pleased. I had seen the short version which they had made a few years before

and really liked it."

While the basic premise may sound like a rather innocuous setup for a director with a reputation for both raw and brutal cinema, it is necessary to clarify that this is no mere light-hearted farce, but a blood-soaked and bittersweet comedy, peppered with memorable dialogue and startlingly explicit scenes of violence. *Sightseers'* tongue-in-cheek proceedings are delivered by a couple of loveable outcasts you wouldn't be surprised to see managing a stall at a local craft fair, or sitting near the wall at the chess club's fortnightly meeting.

Making the bold leap to escape the domineering presence of her overbearing mother, Tina embarks on an excursion in a caravan with her new boyfriend Chris. A quiet, but affable chap, his eccentricity seems to be simpatico with Tina's inherent oddness (no meagre feat, for this is a woman who knits her own erotic lingerie), and their combined charm soon

piques both interest and empathy within the characters. That is, until the murders begin.

The British are renowned hobbyists, and Chris is no exception. Whilst initially proclaiming that he is on a sabbatical from work to begin writing his debut novel, it soon transpires that his true passion lies in violence. He begins a series of horrific, yet strangely gleeful, killings, while Tina becomes ever more embroiled. "Murder is kind of like a hobby isn't it?" quips Wheatley. "It's something that people do and they go back to it, especially if they're doing it over a long period of time. It's a very specialist, niche pursuit." Chris' behaviour certainly echoes this sentiment, albeit in a more haphazard than calculated manner.

With Tina and Chris being quite sympathetic characters, it prompts the question of where a filmmaker should take a stance on creating empathetic on-screen murderers. "You just make them



"*Sightseers'* tongue-in-cheek proceedings are delivered by a couple of loveable outcasts you wouldn't be surprised to see managing a stall at a local craft fair, or sitting near the wall at the chess club's fortnightly meeting."



Ben Wheatley on the set of *Sightseers* (2012)

"Whereas *Natural Born Killers* is a hallucinogen-fueled Friday night, *Sightseers* is an ambling Sunday constitutional."

as human as possible and their actions become the things which betray them." Wheatley notes. "They do these terrible things and the audience judges that. You can't be too empathetic; you just make characters that are as real as possible."

Perhaps then, it is not so much empathy, but reality and affinity which we see in these outcasts. "I don't believe in setting characters up and poking fun at them from a filmmaker's point of view; I don't have that voice." Of his motives, Wheatley explains: "I do, however, believe that you should be behind your characters and to try to see the good in them as much as you can, even if they are doing things which are reprehensible. If I'd gone into it with an attitude that they were idiots, then that would have shone through in the movie."

Chris and Tina are far from idiots; eccentric and colloquial, definitely, but in many ways they are more certain of themselves than many other characters that appear in the film. Film history knows many lovers who embark on killing sprees, and the tone of *Badlands*, *Bonnie and Clyde* and *Natural Born Killers* couldn't be further from that of *Sightseers*. Tina is an awkward young woman with a great deal of issues and peculiarities, whereas Chris seems significantly more determined and focused. The self-assurance he possesses stems from the violent acts of murder he commits. Violence appears to bring clarity and purpose to his life, which is in disarray and fragmentation, possibly due to the loss of his job. Wheatley states that *Sightseers* contains a message about the recession and its effect on people contained within the film, to do with the disillusionment and impotent rage felt by a nation, summed up in the extremities of Chris and Tina's behaviour. Do seemingly everyday, stressful extraneous fac-

tors have the ability to take someone who is not, essentially, a "bad" person, and turn them into a cold-blooded killer?

It is within this question that the aforementioned sympathy is generated. The sense of the "glamorous murderer" is never created within *Sightseers*; however, there is an empathy that is elicited from the connectivity and charm Tina and Chris emit. The job of any filmmaker is to construct a genuine and solid affinity for the characters which appear on screen, and this is the downfall of many contemporary features. Regardless of what you may have seen them in before, Oram and Lowe are, for all intents and purposes, Chris and Tina. We are never brought out of the story for a moment; such is the commanding nature of their presence within each frame. Their infectious charm is what binds *Sightseers* together, and what makes things all the more affecting when its wheels start to come off.

Tina begins to display possessive and insecure tendencies when Chris develops a friend in the form of Richard, a likeable and daft individual, who is in the process of testing out his 'Carapod' (an experimental mobile camping device). Chris' burgeoning friendship does not go down well with Tina, who sees Richard as an interruption to their relationship. Whilst Chris' feelings towards Tina have not changed at all, her behaviour begins to become erratic and dangerous. This is the first point at which we experience her potential capability, placing her on equal, if not greater levels of impending threat as Chris. He had previously displayed similar insecurities as he fantasized about Tina attending a pagan ritual which was taking place near their campsite, which also culminated in similarly disastrous re-

sults.

The acts of murder and associated violence which are carried out begin in a comedic and throwaway tone, with the first victim being run over by a caravan—his lacerated throat gushing forth enough claret to make Lucio Fulci proud. The intensity heightens as the incidents progress, and before long we are witness to a non-threatening (if slightly irritating) character having his skull battered in by Chris in one of the least deserved kills. None of the people who die in *Sightseers* deserve to, and this may be the turning point which highlights that point for us.

The gore in *Sightseers* is both visceral and shocking, with bludgeoning and maiming aplenty. This was something that wasn't in the original script. "I put that in," Wheatley elaborates. "I think that it wouldn't have done the characters justice if you hadn't seen it. If it was all very tasteful, it would have been more wor-

rying than if you manage to upset your audience with what they see. No one deserves to die in that film and the violence is a reminder that what Chris and Tina are doing is wrong."

It was a difficult line to walk. Lowe and Oram's script may have lacked the intense graphic carnage that is now to be found within the murder sequences, but the balance between it and the infectious comedy that emits from the pair is superbly constructed.

A significant amount of the comedy is generated by the construct of individuals who are at odds with their environment, yet are simultaneously attempting to amalgamate with it. Chris and Tina find themselves frustrated and angered by the behaviour of others, as they make a genuine attempt to enjoy themselves. They try to conduct themselves in a friendly manner;



however, this leads, more often than not, to assault, death or dognapping.

Were the lead roles played by actors with less ability to create total immersion within the story, *Sightseers* may not have worked. It has a pace which is different to that of which one would normally associate with films containing such vicious content. Whereas *Natural Born Killers* is a hallucinogen-fueled Friday night, *Sightseers* is an ambling Sunday constitutional. The structure of the film may be unusual to some, although it doesn't take long to adjust to the method in which the film is delivered. There are many punchlines, but they are subtle and take a moment to sink in, making the comedy as oblique and unpredictable as our protagonists at times.

This unpredictability was something which allowed for great improvisation on set, but also for the development of the violent content. The director knew, however, that there was a limit when it came to how much a comedy audience would stomach. "You can't go too far either," Wheatley explains. "If you horrify your audience too much they won't be able to laugh again, because they literally go into shock. It's a physiological thing." This is something that Ben Wheatley knows all too well; "After the hammer scene in *Kill List* it takes people at least 15 minutes for their hearts to calm down and go back to a normal pace. I made the film, and that sequence still manages to make me feel heightened for a good few minutes afterwards. If you do that in a comedy, however, you're not going to get another laugh out of the audience. You're just going to make them angry."

Sightseers developed and changed form a great deal over the course of its shoot, with a significant amount of improvisation taking place on set. Jump provided a further draft of the original script

and the amalgamation of talents created a dark, unique, funny and highly original film. Its uniqueness makes it difficult to pigeonhole. It's certainly hard to tie down the influences which led to this tone and register. "There's not a lot of comedy-horror which matches my social-realist style," says Wheatley. "The only thing which may be close to it is *Man Bites Dog*."

One significant development within *Sightseers*' characters is their behaviour, and the places which they visit along the way. The titular vacationers venture through a succession of modest tourist traps, comparable to the roadside attractions of the US highways. "The idea is that they're experiencing things from the past." The director explains of his choice of locations, "They go backwards through industrial settings, the mines and so on, until basically they end up like cavemen at the end." This allegory creates many questions, as do Chris' actions: "He's angry. He's angry with everyone and anyone who steps in his way will feel the brunt of that," is how Wheatley sums it up.

One of the most noteworthy factors of *Sightseers* is its music—something that Wheatley feels is one of the benefits of making a movie. A fan of the Internet music-streaming platform Spotify, he designs his playlists for all of his films, lining up roughly 300 tracks for each one. "I'll play them all in pre-production, thinking about the music all the time. I try to have a rationale for each of the movies."

He continues: "For *Down Terrace*, it was all music that the Bill character would have had in his house. In *Kill List*, it was different as it was all music which would have made you really upset. [*Sightseers*], however, is an idea about hidden histories." Influenced by the idea of Kratutrock, and the subsequent influence, which is had on British pop music of the late '70s

and early '80s, Wheatley creates a distinctive soundscape to accompany the feature. "I started putting together a soundtrack which was all of this obscure German music along with big glossy pop stuff that came out of the UK afterwards," he says. "It would have also been music from Chris and Tina's childhood. They would have heard it as kids." The use of several well-known tracks such as "Tainted Love" by Soft Cell and "The Power of Love" by Frankie Goes to Hollywood are used to great effect within the film, as well as lesser known works by Harmonia and Popol Vuh.

So what's up next for Ben Wheatley? An HBO show and his first big budget feature are in the works. "*The Silk Road* series will be a long process." He says, "It had to be finished and piloted so that'll be a year or so. *Freakshift* we're hoping to do this year and my most recent film, *A Field in England*, is out on June 5th." *Sightseers* is available in the US from May 13th. "They're doing something interesting with the release, in that they're showing it on TV, the cinemas and VOD all at the same time. That way you hit the TV audience with that one off screening." An interesting concept and one which should definitely open up Wheatley's films to a wider audience. If what he has achieved in *Sightseers* is anything to go by, this can be no bad thing.

by Colin McCracken



LOCK UP YOUR FATHERS





WRITER KEVIN LEHANE AND FX SPECIALIST SHAUNE HARRISON'S
IRISH HORROR-COMEDY GRABS PINTS—AND FACES.

IT'S LAST CALL for drinks and you'd better include yourself in this round, as your life may well depend on it. *Grabbers* is the sleeper hit that astounded critics and audiences alike when it was unleashed on the UK festival circuit in late 2012. Now the film is about to hit stateside screens, and *Diabolique* spoke with two of the individuals without whom *Grabbers* would not be possible: writer Kevin Lehane and special effects artist Shaune Harrison—the men behind the monsters.

Set on the fictitious Erin Island, *Grabbers* is the tale of a misanthropic Garda (police officer) named Ciarán O'Shea (Richard Coyle), who becomes lumbered with an eager, young city officer Lisa Nolan (Ruth Bradley) who has been assigned to the island for a two-week stint. O'Shea seems happiest when he has a drink in his hand—a stark contrast to the teetotal and precocious manner of his new partner. Subsequent action results in their discovery of the 'Grabbers' (the moniker is allocated to the creatures by a local), which descend upon the unsuspecting rural Irish community in a vicious and terrifying way. One deterrent is discovered, however: if the townsfolk remain drunk, the monsters will leave them alone due to their inbuilt aversion to alcohol.

Taking refuge in the local bar, the populace begin to consume their weight in stout, whiskey and poteen (Irish moonshine). Hilarious without being exclusively colloquial, *Grabbers* is a significant turning point for Irish cinema, genre or otherwise. It has, however, been a long and arduous road to get to this point. "The script was originally written in 2007, and it took about 3 years to get anybody to read it," explains Lehane. "I began without having any connections in the industry, and just wrote it as a film I would have loved to see on a Friday night. It spawned from there."

The catalyst for *Grabbers* came while Lehane was backpacking. Having had terrible problems with mosquitos, he was advised by a fellow traveller that if he ingested large quantities of Marmite

(divisive yeast extract spread) that the source of his irritation would be repulsed and leave him be. When it was finished, he began knocking on doors—"Without any success." He adds: "You learn very quickly within the industry not to take 'no' as a literal 'no,' because it usually means 'not yet.' I had one company who approached me two years after initially passing on it wanting to work with me on it. I made sure to remind them that they had initially turned it down." Once Lehane became more familiar with the doggedness that is required to succeed within the film business, he began to make progress. "I managed to get one person in particu-

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lar to read it," he says. "[Working Title] helped me get it out, and suddenly everybody was interested in making it. It snowballed from there."

2009 onwards was when things really took off for Lehane. "I met Jon Wright and the producers Kate [Myers] and Tracy [Brimm], and within 12 months of that sit down meeting, we were shooting the film." The shoot lasted approximately two months, but





“GRABBERS WAS DEFINITELY AIMING TO BE AN AMBLIN MOVIE SET IN IRELAND.”

filming was split over the Christmas period. “It was a full year in post-production,” Lehane adds, “because there were a lot of visual effects and it’s quite a low budget production, so it took its time.”

FX wizard Shaune Harrison, who cut his teeth working for Image Animation (*Hellraiser*, *Nightbreed*) in the late ‘80s and early ‘90s, came to *Grabbers* via Jon Wright. After coming on board, however, Harrison initially had some trepidation about the magnitude of Wright and Lehane’s ideas. “I asked him what it was about and he said, ‘Imagine a giant octopus in the sea,’

to which I replied that I couldn’t do it, as that’s CG,” he remarks. “He had no designs whatsoever at that stage, and it was so early on.” And what did this small crew have to work with? Not a lot it would seem. “There was a £3 million budget. The first thing they asked was ‘How can we do this cheaply?’ Paddy was adamant that he didn’t want everything made [digitally]. They simply didn’t have the means to do so. We knew we had to get creative.”

The low budget may have set challenges for the SFX team, but it meant that Lehane could become more involved. The tightness of the crew meant that his presence on set was far greater than most writers are

usually granted in an adaptation of their work. “As it was such a low-budget production, I was included a lot more,” Lehane says. He elaborates, before hinting: “The fact that I’m Irish was a big help. One of the producers was French-American, the other was English. Jon claims he’s Irish, but he left when he was about 12, and he’s got a strong Herefordshire accent. I was relied on as the Irishman on the production.”

Once the team was on the same page while developing their concepts, the film’s titular creatures became priority number one. “The Grabbers themselves were always intended to be a creature which lay somewhere between a spider and an eel, that moved like tumbleweed and had this long tongue which would shoot out at things,” Lehane says. The ecology of the beasts was also considered: “I knew it was something which needed rain to survive, so it was going to be wet. I intended to make the definitive tentacle creature. I wanted to make the ecology of the monsters really robust, and to give them a life cycle and their own idiosyncratic characteristics.” This belief in his monsters, and the foresight of meticulously defining their world, allowed Lehane to immerse them within Erin Island in an effective and natural manner.

Harrison was given the task of developing one of the largest creatures. “We had the mother grabber, which was called Grabberella, and that was six feet in diameter. We had to work out how many tentacles we were going to attach. It became 13. That was a very strange number to work with. Even when I was drawing it initially, it was so difficult to get 13 on there, so they had to be double layered.” This star-like creature, with its vicious looking mouth at the centre, remains one of the most memorable monster images used within the film.

Not all the creatures made it from the page to the screen, however. “We had little creatures originally called Jumpers, which had two little legs and would hop, like chickens,” says Lehane. “Then they would lose those legs, like a reverse tadpole and would grow tentacles.” So, why

did these beasts not make it into the final cut? “When we started to do concept work with Paddy Eason and Jon, they ended up looking like an entirely different species. We didn’t have time to answer all of the questions which these creatures would arise.”

Not all of *Grabbers*’ creatures proved to be such a massive challenge. “The eggs were simpler,” Harrison notes, “as they were just balls. My wife made these beautiful translucent silicone eggs, which had so much depth and feel to them, they had so many veins and stuff inside.” Everything then took on a new and exciting pace, as a new member joined the team. “[Concept artist Paul Catling] came in and nailed every design first time. I had recommended him, and it was great that he joined the crew. His production paintings were beautiful.”

With a definite vision of how to proceed and a clear sense of the budgetary limitations put in place, Harrison was ready to rise to the challenge. “Because I’d worked at Image Animation in the ‘80s and ‘90s, it was nice to return to that old school vibe. We were working on the fly and that made us more creative. Jon wanted that ‘80s feel and we gave him ‘80s effects,” he says. Lehane, too, was intent on capturing *Grabbers*’ ‘80s feel. “The definitive era for the monster movie was the ‘50s, but the ‘80s had its fair share as well,” says Lehane. “I grew up with *Grem-lins*, *Jaws*, and the John Carpenter films; they were all what excited me back then.”

Lehane continues: “Everyone is chasing the Amblin aesthetic at the moment, and that’s essentially because everyone in power in the industry today grew up with the same reference points. I don’t know if everyone’s being very successful at it, but they’re definitely trying. *Grabbers* was definitely aiming to be an Amblin movie set in Ireland.”

Although *Grabbers* strays from the Irish stereotype which is oftentimes placed on screen, its marketing campaign has been largely focused on the alcohol consumption it depicts. “I tend to focus on the story as a whole, rather than one element of it,” says Lehane of the possible

mixed messages sent out by that marketing scheme. “It’s structured as a mystery; you expect it to go a very different route than the way it does. Then the alcohol got pushed front and center.” It’s hard to know if this was a sore point or not; if it were kept secret, it would make *Grabbers* a movie with one of the best midway plot twists in recent history.

Lehane sticks to his guns in respect to the integral part of the story which the alcohol serves. “It’s their only weapon,” he explains. “They can’t fight back, so they do what they have to do to take themselves off the menu. It’s not any excuse to get drunk, it’s the last resort.” Being well versed in Irish cinema, Lehane knew exactly what he didn’t want from *Grabbers*. “I didn’t want it to fall into the trap of everyone speaking Irish and dancing jigs at the crossroads, with livestock crossing the roads, holding up cars and stuff,” he stresses. “I didn’t want to portray Ireland as living in the ‘50s while the rest of the world is moving at warp speed. You see that a lot in other Irish films, where they just focus on the parochial. [*Grabbers*] setting is somewhere that’s real and those characters do exist. It can be truthful to Ireland without being all ‘Begorrah’ and ‘Bejesus.’”

The Irish have a rich tradition of monsters in both folklore and mythology, as well as in later literary offerings, yet there seems to be an inherent lack of quality Irish horror in contemporary cinema. “I think it has a lot to do with budgets to be honest with you,” Lehane surmises. “We tend to be hampered by that. We were putting 35 foot monsters on screen that were eating people and throwing things about the place. There are a lot of restrictions; you can’t shoot at night, because you get penalized a lot. This whole notion that you hear on sets around the world where people are shooting 18 hour days, busting their asses to get the best of everything on screen while they have that window to shoot the film—that really isn’t the case in Ireland.” This restrictive nature may be part of the reason why the interior photography was relocated to Belfast, in Northern Ireland, which is under differ-

ent laws to the Republic. “You can’t move your unit base too quickly, or too far from where people are living, as you will have to pay a fortune to put the crew up and there’s many other things like that which make it very difficult,” Lehane says about filming in [southern] Ireland. “We know we can’t pull off those big cinematic projects. Hopefully *Grabbers* will turn the tide on that a little bit.”

One instance which beautifully encapsulates the chaotic shoot of *Grabbers* comes from Harrison: “The most terrifying shot for me was when they set fire to the Grabber, as it was the only one we had.” The scene was, however, integral to the story and so it was necessary to ignite the beast. “It was an expensive prop and Jon kept saying to me ‘Don’t make it perfect, make it look like it’s just come out of the sea,’ so we were using all sorts of things, including adding brown sugar to it, to give it a crustiness. Then they set it on fire. It was silicone and so it was fireproof, but even so, I was wary. Jon assured me that they’d just set fire to a corner of it, but the entire thing went up and I glanced over at Jon in absolute fear. It was a 3 minute take, and by the end I was just a wreck. It was okay in the end, thankfully,” he breathes, with an audible sigh of relief.

“It was a crazy shoot,” says Harrison, “but it was really like an old fashioned creature film, which I loved, because I hadn’t done one in such a long time. I’ve worked on so many movies in the last few years which have had endless money and people involved, and to go back to something with such a small budget and crew was great.”

by Colin McCracken





SIDE SPLITTING

THE EVOLUTION OF HORROR-COMEDY

From Abbott and Costello to Wright, Pegg and Frost, horror-comedy has evolved into a beast of its own.

Photo courtesy of Ronald V. Borst/Hollywood Movie Posters

IT ALL STARTED with simple business mathematics. At the time, Bud Abbott and Lou Costello were the golden boys of comedy, bringing their vaudevillian rapport and impeccable comedic timing to various levels of box office success, and there had been no figures as recognizable or profitable in horror cinema as the Universal Monsters. By combining the two elements, not only would Universal be breathing new life into both long-running cinematic staples, but financial success was guaranteed, as the hybrid would, for the first time, attract audiences of both genres. And thus, when *Abbott and Costello Meet Frankenstein* hit theaters to critical acclaim and box office triumph, the subgenre of horror comedy was born.

Although an argument can be made that Tod Browning's *Freaks* and Frank Capra's *Arsenic and Old Lace*'s hybridity may have preceded Abbott and Costello's, and that the cultural seeds of horror-comedy may have been planted as far back as the 1920s and the films of James Whale, the subgenre never came into its own as concretely as in *Abbott and Costello Meet Frankenstein*. Director Charles Barton knew how to navigate the comedy aspects of the comedic team, allowing various horror mythologies and tropes to become parodied in the duo's

routine. And with the duo came the credentials of having support from several of the original Universal Monster actors, including Bela Lugosi, Glenn Strange, and Lon Chaney, Jr. (although original *Frankenstein* actor Boris Karloff refused to work with the duo out of respect for the horror genre, at least until his appearance in *Abbott and Costello Meet The Killer, Boris Karloff*). Once Universal struck gold, the mining begun, with Abbott and Costello meeting the Invisible Man, Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde and *The Mummy* further down the road to dwindling returns.

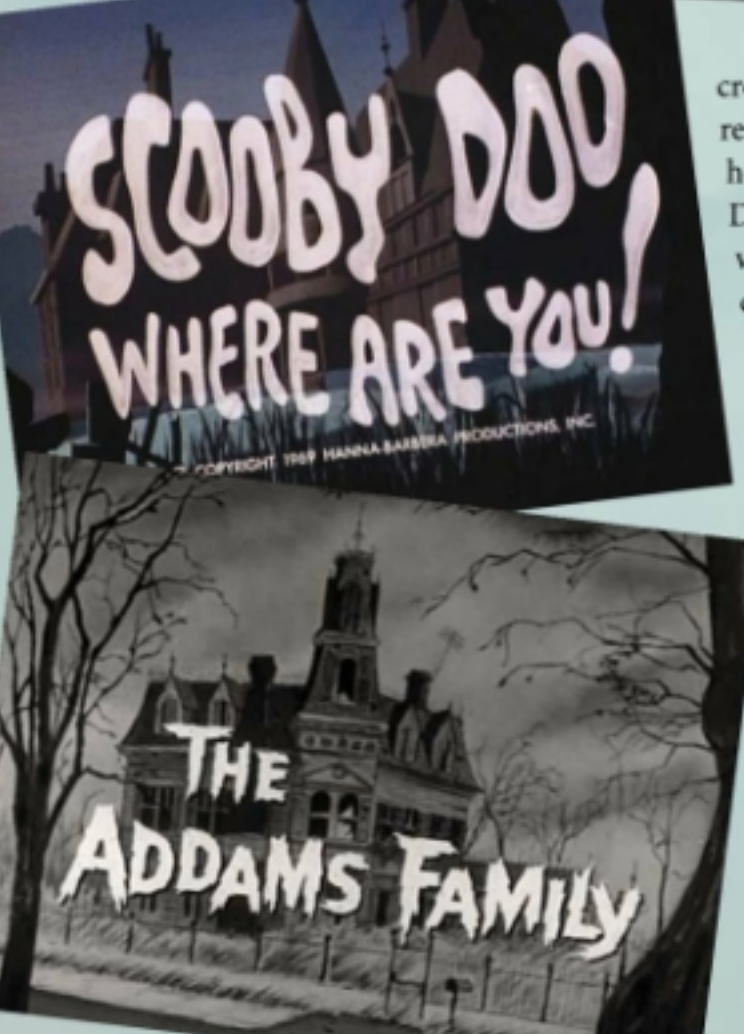
Abbott and Costello's cinematic ex-

"Abbott and Costello's cinematic exploration of gothic tropes acted as a stepping stone for a fiendish horror-comedy underground and returned horror to prominence."





Photo courtesy of Ronald V. Borst/Hollywood Movie Posters



ploration of gothic tropes acted as a stepping stone for a fiendish horror-comedy underground and returned horror to prominence simultaneously, as monster movies grew in popularity in post-McCarthy America. It was during this time that the underground genre scene also

gave way to Ed Wood, whose unintentional horror-comedies gave way to the ironic consumption of cinema that flourishes today, especially amongst the youth market. And horror-comedy began to resonate as a date movie amongst the young adult demographics of the 1950s, a tradition that can still be seen in audiences today.

"I think horror-comedy works because even the most serious scary movies bring nervous laughter out of the crowd. So why not just go ahead and get regular laughter too?" asks comedian and host of the "Doug Loves Movies" podcast, Doug Benson. Benson continues: "We will always have horror-comedies, because they work well in theaters as well as at home. It's the perfect date night movie, because at least half of most couples—and I'm not trying to be sexist here, since the half I'm talking about could just as easily be the dude—are a little too scaredy pants for flat-out horror. The laughs help the frightening medicine go down. And they are great for watching at home, because if you're laughing, you're less likely to get scared by all life's demons lurking outside your windows."

After the 1950s had come and

gone, monster movies had had their day in the sun, and EC Comics had become the victim of increased censorship. As the youth market of the '60s went looking for something more colorful and subversive, in stepped Roger Corman. Corman, who also produced straight-faced science fiction and horror films alongside his horror-comedy productions, was the first of his kind to introduce the element of spoof and black comedy, in the 1960 production of *The Little Shop of Horrors*. By telling the tale of a killer plant and a hopeless romantic, Corman embedded the B-movie into the mainstream consciousness; *The Little Shop of Horrors* played out of competition at the 1960 Cannes Film Festival, and received a warm critical and commercial reaction upon its theatrical release. Corman's first move soon inspired more people to invest in the world of horror-comedy, tapping into the sensibilities of European audiences who slanted more towards the darkly humorous.

On the television front, horror-comedy harbored the disregarded monster movies of days gone by, allowing lighthearted situational comedy to be juxtaposed with the macabre elements of *The Addams Family* and *The Munsters*. Whereas *The Addams Family's* situational comedy run featured a more dynamic family element and a tongue-in-cheek attitude towards the audience, the show's appearance on television was enough to tune out the fans of the cartoon that inspired it, including *The New Yorker* editor William Shawn, who discontinued the strip until his death. Unlike *The Addams Family*, *The Munsters* appeared as a much more family-friendly and palatable option to the horror-comedy audience, which actually did very little to stop the series from reaching a similar fate as *The Addams Family* (although time has been very kind to both series in terms of resurgences with kitsch audiences).

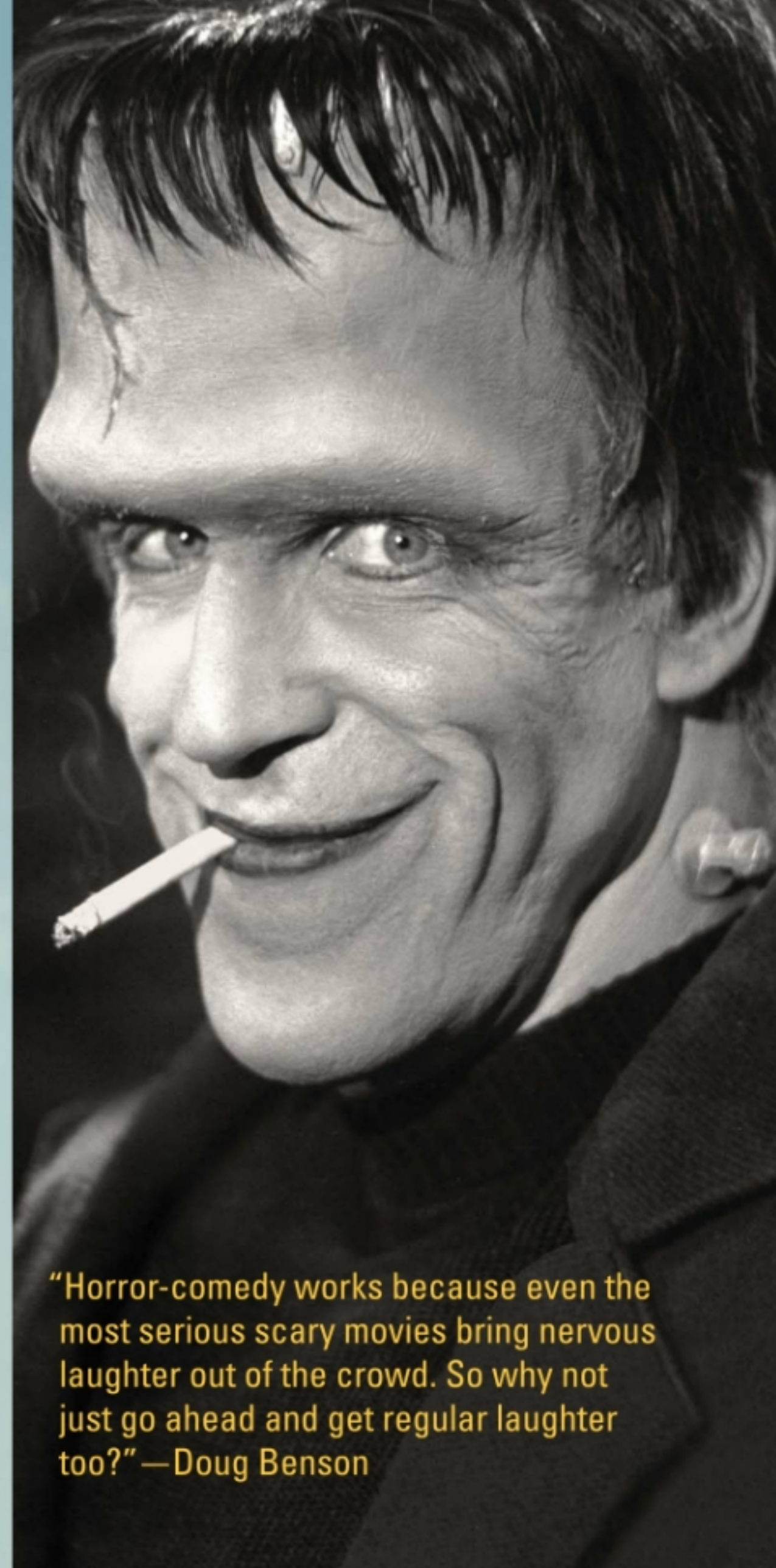
Horror-comedy also found a comfortable home in the world of animation. On one hand, films like *Mad Monster Party* emphasized the silliness that monster movies had on a conceptual level, using the dead and macabre as spring-

boards for slapstick and sight gags that were much easier to pull off without live-action actors. On the other hand, the late '60s birthed *Scooby Doo, Where Are You?*—perhaps the most recognizable horror-comedy cartoon series of all time—which added elements of detective procedurals to larger-than-life horror-inspired characters and situational comedy humor together in an unexpected recipe for success.

"I'll always have a soft spot for *Mad Monster Party*. It's not particularly scary, and it's not hilarious, but there's something really charming to me about all of the famous monsters getting together and partying," says Benson. "You have to love when *The Werewolf* runs off with the leg of one of the dudes in the all-skeleton band. Plus, the movie ends with a nod to *Some Like It Hot*, which is pretty cool."

The cultural revolution of the 1960s led to the first generation of self-aware cinema in the 1970s, starting out with Mel Brooks's 1974 classic, *Young Frankenstein*. In removing most elements of the horror genre while maintaining a healthy respect for the material that preceded it, *Young Frankenstein* at no point feels mean-spirited or "above" the material it parodies; instead, the film provides iconic horror figures with hilarious situations and quotable rapport. The movie became a box office smash, and its endurance to this day is indicated by its adaptation into a musical.

The same year that *Young Frankenstein* won critics in the mainstream spectrum, two horror-comedies came out of the depths of rock 'n' roll to varying degrees of cult fandom, redefining the consumption of cult films. The first was from an up-and-coming filmmaker named Brian De Palma—a musical mixture between *The Phantom of the Opera* and *Faust*, except heavier on the glam rock elements and free-wheeling spirits of the '70s rock scene. Despite critical panning and financial underperformance, *The Phantom of the Paradise* still holds a cult audience and reverence among De Palma die-hards today. However, a much more powerful horror comedy musical debuted the following year: *The Rocky*



"Horror-comedy works because even the most serious scary movies bring nervous laughter out of the crowd. So why not just go ahead and get regular laughter too?"—Doug Benson

He's been maimed and framed, beaten, robbed and mutilated. But they still can't keep him from the woman he loves.



Horror Picture Show.

Rocky Horror, previously a terrifically received stage show, came to the screen from director Jim Sharman and composer Richard O'Brien. Despite a soft opening, the film took off big time as the first horror-comedy mid-night movie, bringing in enthusiastic crowds on a weekly basis to laugh, sing and dance to its interactive production. To this day, the original print of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* still plays in certain theaters and draws in major crowds during midnight screenings. By giving the audience objectives, music and a collaborative platform, *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* defied the expectations of the horror-comedy and became culturally iconic in the process.

By the end of the '70s, horror-comedy took a big step forward, becoming one of the first subgenres to become aware of itself. For instance, the films of Roger Corman and B-monster-movies were bitingly spoofed in the cult hit *The Attack of the Killer Tomatoes*. Employing low-budget aesthetics and high concept ideas to make fun of those very same



storytelling techniques, *Killer Tomatoes* became at once an enigmatic horror-comedy criticism and a silly horror-comedy in itself. In fact, Corman soon followed in the footsteps of *Killer Tomatoes*, choosing *Piranha* to spoof of the big-budgeted *Jaws* and ride the coattails of the animal horror boom that followed that Steven Spielberg classic. Here, Corman used self-reflective storytelling tactics to keep light about his own place in the world of filmmaking, and was able to expand his audience while taking his films to even more ridiculous places than before.

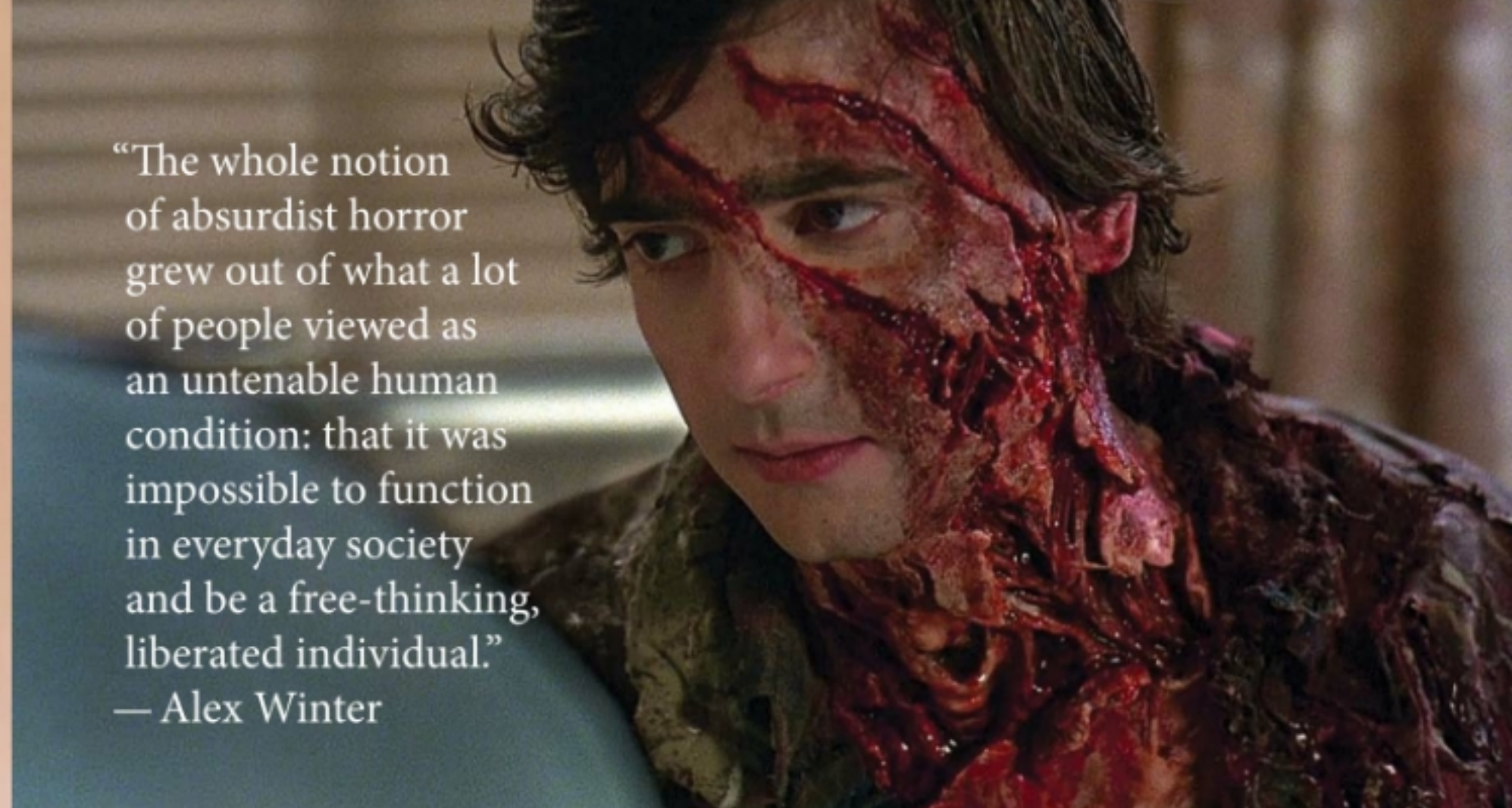
Considering it took only 10 years for horror-comedy to go from *The Munsters* and *Scooby Doo* to transvestite mad scientists, killer vegetables and demonic Japanese cats, one wonders where exactly things had gotten so crazy. The answer, interestingly enough, may lie in the transition of the culture itself, and the schizophrenic nature of entertainment.

"I think what happened in post-Vietnam America was that Americans responded to the beginning of the psychosis and schizoid nature of American popular culture. On one side you had the American dream, and on the other side you had the really ugly reality that had been brushed under the carpet," says *Freaked* co-creator and director of the new Napster documentary, *Downloaded*, Alex Winter, who adds, "Lots of people were getting killed and lots of people were coming back with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder to this very blanketed situation. 'You must conform here, you must ignore these dark realities, forget with your suburban house and your garage'—you had a lot of rebuttal to that notion."

"The whole notion of absurdist horror grew out of what a lot of people viewed as an untenable human condition: that it was impossible to function in everyday society and be a free-thinking, liberated individual," continues Winter. "Horror-comedy is one of the really great genres for exploring that. Those of us who grew up after the '60s social revolution also lived with disillusionment that all of the hope of culture

"The whole notion of absurdist horror grew out of what a lot of people viewed as an untenable human condition: that it was impossible to function in everyday society and be a free-thinking, liberated individual."

— Alex Winter



radicalization had been squashed, and now you live in this very conservative Nixon era, which was the opposite of what everybody had wanted to be living in."

As the '80s began, however, the world of horror-comedy had a drastic makeover, as imaginative comic filmmakers took their influences, from EC Comics to Abbott and Costello, to a new level, ushering in the invention of convincing practical effects and studio-friendly high concepts. The introduction of these elements came into the public eye with the arrival of *An American Werewolf in London*. Formerly known best for his comedic directing, filmmaker John Landis teamed up with special-effects maestro Rick Baker and production house The Gubers-Peters company to create the definitive werewolf film; their goal was to inject a healthy yet dark sense of humor into the project, while allowing its tension and carnage to turn the heads of even the most weathered horror fan. Landis's film outperformed the similarly themed *The Howling* at the box office, despite the smaller budget of the former film, and Landis not only became a name respected in the comedy community, but the horror community as well.

Following *American Werewolf*, two

films emerged that, up to this day, still inspire controversy as to whether or not they qualify in the horror-comedy category. The first film is George A. Romero's *Creepshow*, a film that transposed the world of EC Comics into live-action, using exaggerated color schemes and Tom Savini's incredible effects work to bring forth comedic, hyperreal elements of pulp to the screen. However, *Creepshow*'s straight-faced delivery has inspired the ire of horror-comedy purists in discussions of the subgenre.

The other film, of course, is none other than Sam Raimi's *The Evil Dead*. Where many fans of Raimi and the series will decry *The Evil Dead* as horror through and through, yet made through a low budget lens that may appear to be humorous, an equal amount of vocal Raimi fans will declare the film to be a horror-comedy in spades. *The Evil Dead* contains several bits of nasty imagery, including its infamous "tree-rape" sequence, ankles being stabbed with pencils and splattery business throughout, and the argument for its status as a horror-comedy film is still somewhat valid; some of the film's characters reactions, and its over-the-top violent quotient, are more

likely to lean towards Corman territory than that of pre-*Scream* Wes Craven.

"I think that Sam Raimi should be credited with bringing horror-comedy into the mainstream. *Evil Dead* was the end of subversive



BOTTOM LEFT: *Freaked* (1993); and director, Alex Winter



studio with a cult following," proudly states Troma co-founder Lloyd Kaufman. "I think the reason we have such a strong following and a brand is that our movies are entertaining. They're thought provoking, they have something to say, the characters within our films are well defined and sympathetic, and when you go to see a Troma movie, you go to see something you hadn't seen before. You're going to be challenged, and you're going to feel genuine emotion. Very few films will give you that genuine emotion."

At the same time Troma began veering into stranger, more subversive territory and

comedy vehicle for John Belushi, John Candy, Eddie Murphy and Dan Aykroyd, Belushi's death and the non-committal responses from Murphy and Candy left the film in the hands of *Saturday Night Live* breakout star Bill Murray. With Harold Ramis and Ernie Hudson stepping in for Candy and Murphy, respectively, as well as adding *Little Shop of Horrors* star Rick Moranis in a side role and *Alien* star Sigourney Weaver as the female lead, director Ivan Reitman allowed the imaginations and chemistry of the four leads to run rampant. The legacy of *Ghostbusters*, even marred by a sub-par sequel, is still that of not only an effective horror-comedy, but one of the most solid comedy films, period.

While *Ghostbusters'* great boxoffice expectations were being met in the States, a young filmmaker named Peter Jackson began to garner a small but aggressive cult audience amongst cinephiles and audiences in his native New Zealand. Jackson's mixture of splatter-friendly gore, outrageous practical effects and the style of Buster Keaton-esque physical comedy offered something new and different to those not completely shocked by how far the filmmaker was willing to go. Zombie babies, killer puppets and pig-faced aliens became associated with Jackson in films like *Bad Taste*, until the director was later offered to direct the roundly acclaimed *Lord of the Rings* series, as well as an adaptation of *King Kong*.

And as Jackson was making waves just outside of Hollywood, a writer/director named Fred Dekker was assembling the influences of the Amblin films of the '70s and the black-and-white invasion movies of the '50s and '60s. After writing the sleeper hit *House*, Dekker went on to blend the slasher, alien and zombie influences from the previous decade into *Night of the Creeps*, and later collaborated with *Lethal Weapon* writer Shane Black on the quintessential cult kids flick *The Monster Squad*. While neither film impressed at the box office, both have garnered exponentially large fan bases.

Films like *Terrorvision* and *Killer Klowns from Outer Space* attempted to

horror-comedy as it had existed before *Evil Dead II*," says Winter. "The first *Evil Dead* infused comic culture and the Bugs Bunny aesthetic with extreme violence. That was definitely a big influence for [Tom Stern and I]."

As Frank Henenlotter introduced the subtle comedy of situational paranoia and feeling unaccepted into the monster movie *Basket Case*, horror met its match with the independent satire of Troma Entertainment and their flagship franchise, *The Toxic Avenger*. Adding elements of all-too-familiar superhero comics, gory monster B-movies and ridiculous coming-of-age comedies, Troma added social and political subtexts to create biting yet mind-numbingly fun independent entertainment that caught a loud and devoted cult following.

"Troma is the classic example of a cult film studio. We're an independent

building itself as a brand, comedic monster movies began appearing on the shores of Hollywood—this time under the guiding light of future Dreamworks luminaries Steven Spielberg and David Geffen. Under the direction of Joe Dante and the influence of the now-established Spielberg, *Gremlins* truly redefined "dark comedy" and helped bring about the Motion Picture Association of America's (MPAA) PG-13 rating. Using breathtaking visual effects work from *Piranha's* Chris Walas, Dante exploits the film's creatures and his knack for suspenseful cinema to create an incredible last-act bait and switch; the film's mischievousness (taken by many as mean-spiritedness) gave audiences something they weren't quite used to.

Yet, *Gremlins*, and the films cut from its cloth, paled in comparison to the horror-comedy juggernaut that was *Ghostbusters*. Initially set up as an all-star

"Evil Dead II is just as entertaining as a Busby Berkeley musical. It woke a lot of people up who maybe didn't connect with the existential dread part of horror-comedy, and just how entertaining it could be." —Alex Winter

bring the midnight movie aesthetic successfully into the mainstream, but no film captured the horror-comedy feeling as effectively in the '80s as well as *Evil Dead II*. In returning to the franchise that made his name, Sam Raimi took a sharp left turn, glorifying the comic elements of the franchise and showcasing an incomparable intuition for madcap madness.

"Once [Raimi] made *Evil Dead II*, the game changed," muses Winter. "Part of the reason is that horror-comedy started to enter into mainstream culture, and Raimi was such a genius that he created something that worked so well on a broader level. It woke a lot of people up who maybe didn't connect with the existential dread part of horror-comedy, and just how entertaining it could be. *Evil Dead II* is just as entertaining as a Busby Berkeley musical. Whether or not you like horror-comedy, it's really hard not to like that movie."

"*Evil Dead II* did the best job of being scary and amusing at the same time," adds Benson. "It's a difficult balancing act, with the comedy being slightly more important than the horror. You don't need to scare people with a horror comedy, but you do need to make them laugh. In

fact, I haven't seen the new *Evil Dead* (2013) because I understand that they pretty much took out the funny and just slopped on the gore."

And yet, what comes up must inevitably come crashing down, and horror-comedy came down fast to a commercial and financial dry spell in the 1990s. The first strike came in 1990, when Joe Dante's *Gremlins 2: The New Batch* hit theaters to a perplexed mainstream audience. Instead of offering another *Gremlins* film devoted to suspense and the intriguing mythology of its Mogwai creatures, Dante instead served up a zany satire of the corporatization of entertainment, adding new creatures that were more cartoony than dangerous and ramping up the comedy from dark to borderline insane. "In the case of *Gremlins 2*, the comedy pretty much

overwhelmed the horror, making it just a comedy—a comedy I like a great deal, but am not remotely scared by," notes Benson.

Horror-comedy took another significant blow in the '90s thanks to the more rigid implication of the MPAA's rating systems. The third film in the *Evil Dead* series, *Army of Darkness*, was threatened with the dreaded NC-17 rating, despite having aimed for a PG-13 during pro-



duction. After significant edits, the film, which is the most comically based of the series, was given an R-rating, which gave it the crutches needed to hobble to a box office underperformance. Likewise, Peter Jackson's raucous zombie comedy, *Braindead* (aka *Dead Alive*) fell victim to international ratings; countries around the world branded its content as too bloody or inappropriate for general view.

The hostility of studio executives towards horror-comedy grew to a crescendo with two particular releases: Joss Whedon's dark, satirical *Buffy The Vampire Slayer* and Alex Winter and Tom Stern's bonkers and grotesque *Freaked*. Whereas the first film was watered down and filtered through the Hollywood system to become an edible shell of the original project (which would eventually become a successful television series), *Freaked* suffered a crazier gestation as an R-rated starring vehicle for rock group The Butthole Surfers before being greenlit by Fox as a PG-13, laugh-a-minute mon-

"There's different ways to use [horror-comedy], but the genre grew out of a very deep unrest within our culture. I think some of those themes have been mutated into different avenues, like what Edgar Wright does with his films. He takes that idea of the individual and turns it into a coming-of-age story." —Alex Winter

ster comedy.

"At that time, Joe Roth was running Fox and he had a very filmmaker-friendly ethos. He was greenlighting really big movies like *Home Alone*, but he also really interesting movies like *Barton Fink* and *Naked Lunch*," explains Winters. "So he had a very forward thinking mindset and knew exactly what we wanted to make. *Freaked* pitches very hard on the side of comedy. I'd say it pitches much harder

on the side of comedy than even *Shaun of the Dead*. If we had made an R-rated Butthole Surfers movie, that would have been way more horrific and way more violent. But we were making a PG-13 movie. We weren't concerned about the monster movie mechanics tripping up the audience, because to us, we were making *Airplane!* in the pulp genre."

However, as production drew towards an end, Roth was fired from Fox, and new studio head Peter Chernin stripped the film of its remaining budget and dumped the film into two theaters before bringing it to HBO. *Freaked* maintains a cult audience to this day, with its

brain-melting practical monster effects and relentless punchlines.

It wasn't until horror-comedy returned with a straight face in the form of *Scream*, *From Dusk 'Til Dawn* and, to an extent, *The Frighteners* that it began to flow through popular culture. In essence, *Scream* was a reactionary film; the cinematic equivalent of a trapped animal biting off its own limb to survive. Craven, disillusioned by his career trajectory and angered by pressure to deliver only horror films, learned of screenwriter Kevin Williamson's tongue-in-cheek written treatment of the film, which implemented meta elements to the slasher genre that had not been used previously.

Whereas 2000's *Scary Movie* spoofed a straight-faced horror to comedic effect (and financial success), *American Psycho* brought a level of sophisticated satire to horror films, and Don Coscarelli's *Bubba Ho-Tep* illuminated the independent horror-comedy scene once more. *Cabin Fever* also brought future icon Eli Roth into the current horror zeitgeist. But no film did as much for horror-comedy after the new millennium than Edgar Wright's *Shaun of the Dead*.

"To me, *Shaun of the Dead* is *The Graduate* of horror comedies," says Winter of the British cult sensation. "It's about this guy who doesn't know what to do and doesn't want to settle down with his girlfriend yet, and this situation forces him to grow up. There's different ways

to use [horror-comedy], but the genre grew out of a very deep existential unrest within our culture. I think some of those themes have been mutated into different avenues, like what Edgar Wright does with his films. He takes that idea of the individual and turns it into a coming-of-age story."

Shaun of the Dead's reliance on intellect and long-standing interpersonal humor to counteract the mindless, chaotic will of the zombie genre gained a sizable audience instantaneously. Wright understands the genre well; his inherent slacker-friendly charm and appreciation for the anti-hero turned Hollywood's eyes onto the comedic mastermind. That his mainstay lead acting duo of Simon Pegg and Nick Frost anchor his underdog tales further bolsters his films' appeal as communal experiences—the kind one returns to because of a sense of familiarity with their unassuming on-screen characters, and a comfortability with their off-screen chummy rapport. And even diving into the world of action parodies and comic-book films, Wright, Pegg and Frost have always seemed to insert their darkly humorous love for horror. The trio's love letter to action films, *Hot Fuzz*, was able to implement elements of *The Wicker Man* and Edgar Allen Poe to the proceedings. Some of the film's most identifiable imagery is lifted from *giallo* films; a voyeuristic, black-laden killer acts as the catalyst for *Hot Fuzz*'s gory police-procedural nar-

2013 MIDTERM REPORT

Now that we're in the summer months, a pause to consider the exemplary work of 2013 thus far is in order. *Diabolique*'s staff and contributors to this issue offer their top three genre films seen in the year's first half, along with films they have yet to see they're most anticipating...

COLIN MCCracken

- 1.) *The Lords of Salem* (Dir. Rob Zombie)
- 2.) *Maniac* (Dir. Franck Khalfoun)
- 3.) *The Last Will and Testament of Rosalind Leigh* (Dir. Rodrigo Gudigno)

Most anticipated: *Horns*, *Frankenstein's Army*, *Pacific Rim*

MICHELE "IZZY" GALGANA

- 1.) *Stoker* (Dir. Chan-wook Park)
- 2.) *Jug Face* (Dir. Chad Crawford Kinkle)
- 3.) *V/H/S/2* (Dir. Simon Barrett, Adam Wingard, Gregg Hale, Eduardo Sanchez, Gareth Evans, Timo Tjahjanto, Jason Eisener)

Most anticipated: *Frankenstein's Army*, *Horns*, *Carrie*

KEN HANLEY

- 1.) *Stoker* (Dir. Chan-wook Park)
- 2.) *You're Next* (Dir. Adam Wingard)
- 3.) *V/H/S/2* (Dir. Simon Barrett, Adam Wingard, Gregg Hale, Eduardo Sanchez, Gareth Evans, Timo Tjahjanto, Jason Eisener)

Most anticipated: *The Conjuring*, *The World's End*, *Oldboy*

MAX WEINSTEIN

- 1.) *Stoker* (Dir. Chan-wook Park)
- 2.) *American Mary* (Dir. Jen & Sylvia Soska)
- 3.) *The Lords of Salem* (Dir. Rob Zombie)

Most anticipated: *The Conjuring*, *The Sacrament*, *Snowpiercer*





native.

Wright's humor plays especially well with young audiences, as they are cognizant of his films' intentionality. There are horror influences on Wright's comedy, and the comedy is funny, yet his films' storytelling is so strong and emotionally resonant that there are few who can make exceptional films with the same tools that Wright exceeds with. In *Don't*, Wright's fake Euro-horror trailer in the film *Grindhouse*, the director offers a fleeting glimpse of a film production that appears nonsensical, but yet is so involved within the tropes of the

genre that it somehow makes sense, and is all the funnier for it. Even in Wright's most mainstream production, *Scott Pilgrim vs. The World*, several horror-comedy elements appear; though the tropes here more subdued than in his previous features, it's fitting to note the looming, stalker qualities of Scott's (Michael Cera) ex-girlfriend Knives Chau (Ellen Wong), as well as several horror-inspired non-sequiturs.

Following *Shaun of the Dead*'s boisterous explosion on the cult scene, horror-comedy began unevenly rising back into the cultural consciousness. With every

success, there seems to be an corresponding, albeit less substantial defeat. While the Zucker Brothers reinvigorated the *Scary Movie* franchise, Broken Lizard's *Club Dread* was found dead on arrival. As *Behind the Mask* and *Hatchet* turned new and hilarious spins on the old school slasher film (not unlike *Scream*), monster comedies *Slither* and *Feast* were left to find their audiences on home video following their nearly non-existent theatrical presences. And as *Drag Me to Hell* and *Jennifer's Body* found difficulty at bringing in the box office, *Zombieland* proved that horror-comedy could still work—even with a Hollywood budget.

One big reason for horror-comedy's return, aside



from a youth that grew up on dark comedies made accessible by retailers and rental stores that provided them, is the shifting of the consumer marketplace. In

its conception, services like Netflix allowed by-mail DVD shipping of an extensive catalogue, opening films like *Dead Snow*, *Teeth* and *Troll 2* to reach people whose former option was to go to a local video store and sift through a catalogue of mostly new releases. At this time, schlock filmmaking took advantage of growing midnight audiences and ironic moviegoers, making way for a 3D remake of *Piranha* and its gloriously goofy sequel, *3DD*, to hit theaters while the Syfy Channel and The Asylum ripped off big budget flicks with endearing but mentally deficient "mockbusters." And now that digital distribution

has revolutionized the way people watch films and television, inventive and unique horror comedy films like *Rubber*, *Tucker and Dale vs. Evil* and *Cabin in the Woods* are available at any time at the click of a button, establishing cult audiences at a faster rate than ever.

Even in spite of these recent successes, the future of horror-comedy is still somewhat murky. Changes in technology and audiences still have yet to change Hollywood. Whereas "horror-comedies" such as *Dark Shadows* and *A Haunted House* have appeared in theaters over the past couple of years to varying degrees of critical and commercial success, audiences are still discovering older films, and scourge through the internet to find horror-comedy that still pushes buttons and delves further into lunacy.

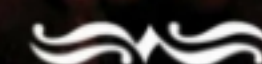
"I have 17,000 people who follow me on Twitter, and every day someone will say, 'I just watched my first Troma movie and gee, it's really good,'" says Kaufman. "Ethan Coen of the Coen Brothers came up to me at Cannes and said he was a big Troma fan, and that he grew up on the Troma movies. We have no access to the marketplace, but we still have a very strong fanbase. If your movie is good, people will find a way to see it, legal or not"

"In fact, I don't think humor and

horror go well together at all. It's commercially not viable. It doesn't work," maintains Kaufman. "A horror-comedy that I saw recently that I really liked was the William Friedkin film, *Killer Joe*. Here we have a film from the man who made *The French Connection* and *The Exorcist*, and he's clearly one of the great American directors, and because he's making an independent movie, it got dumped and the media ignored it."

Will horror-comedy live on to inspire new generations to laugh and gasp? Will the subgenre change and morph to accommodate the constantly changing horror trends of today? Will the independent scene truly remain independent, as media streaming takes a hold of pop culture? There are no definitive answers to those questions, but a few things are for certain: Sam Raimi, Peter Jackson, Joe Dante, Fred Dekker, Ivan Reitman, Edgar Wright and Lloyd Kaufman are still around today. As long as they're still alive and kicking, their successors raring to grab the torch they'll one day pass down, hearts full of horror, brains full of wit and mischief—there will always be hope for horror-comedy.

by Ken Hanley





With *Gremlins 2: The New Batch*, Joe Dante roasts the very system that financed the film.

TO TRULY UNDERSTAND how and why the critical consensus of a tongue-in-cheek horror satire like Joss Whedon's *Cabin in the Woods* was akin to a collective gasp for fresh air, it becomes useful to turn to Joe Dante for answers. "When a picture like *Cabin in the Woods* comes down the pike," Dante says, "you have to look up and say, 'Here's somebody saying 'Here's where we are, here's where we've been, and here's where we're going.' That was kind of what I was trying to do.'" The film Dante was "trying to do" his own genre send-up with is his madcap meta masterstroke *Gremlins 2: The New Batch*, which aimed its comedic crosshairs at the cynical Hollywood machine that spawned it (and countless other soulless sequels) 21 years prior to *Cabin in the Woods*' release. In the annals of horror-comedy, Dante's film plays out like a live-action cartoon turned up to 11, and serves as the template after which the films of the Joss Whedons of the world are lovingly modeled. *Gremlins 2* didn't just try the things *Cabin* pulled off in 2011—the film paved the way in 1990 for others, like Whedon's, to even be considered for release by the same breed of dogmatic studio heads who have pulled the strings of the entertainment industry since time immemorial.

It's worth noting that, when speak-

ing with *Diabolique*, Dante refers to said studio heads—whose only idea of "vision" is one's ability to see dollar signs—by the general descriptor "they." In refraining from naming the film's primary investors at Warner Brothers, the director slyly frames his view of the making of *Gremlins 2* as a standoff between "us" (that is, Dante himself and screenwriter Charles S. Haas) and "them" (the multi-billion dollar fat cats that force-feed filmmakers their creative guidelines). And yet, in spite of that standoff, Dante's final product manages to stand on its own two feet as that rare horror-comedy offering that, like *Cabin in the Woods*, works within the major studio system in order to mock it.

The *Gremlins* brand at large remains commercial-friendly after all these years, but in *Gremlins 2*, the film's most marketable aspects also serve as its most mockable targets—a parodic conundrum Dante insisted he be allowed to exploit if Warner was to secure him as the director of the



project at all. *Gremlins 2* gleefully skewers the action figure/cereal/lunch box culture Dante's creature feature *Gremlins* was dropped into by its financiers in 1984. Although *Gremlins 2* offers the same lovable protagonist that *Gremlins* introduced to the lexicon—that is, the adorable Mogwai creature Gizmo (voiced by Howie Mandel)—special effects guru Rick Baker's introduction of a



timely riff on genetics to the film's script gave him license to create an array of distinct mini-monsters (among them, Daffy, Lenny and George, voiced by heavy metal producer Mark Dodson) who are let loose on an unsuspecting public.

Like *Cabin in the Woods*, *Gremlins 2* takes a firm stance that proclaims: "This is as far as we can go with *this* medium before it goes off the rails." In the case of the former, the medium in question is horror in its entirety, in the latter's, it's the sequel as we know it. Whereas *Cabin's* final frame depicts a world inundated with tired genre tropes and clichés literally and figuratively imploding in on itself, *Gremlins 2* follows its titular creatures as they tear down super-rich CEO Daniel Clamp's (John Glover) Clamp Enterprises office building, signifying a spirited middle finger to corporate executives' exploitation of sequels' commercial viability. When this writer offers these films' similarly satirical bents for Dante to consider, the director pauses, then responds with a laugh: "Yeah. That sounds good! Print

that!"

As demonstrated by this quip, Dante understands how to defuse his audience, whether he's behind the camera or in one-on-one conversation (like the retrospective one he shares with us on his sequel-to-end-all-sequels). Indeed, it's Dante's accurate gauging of audiences' expectations that allows him to subvert them best. Are the stereotypically unwitting New York citizens ravaged by *Gremlins 2's* gremlins stand-ins for Dante's idea of film-goers at large? Is the Clamp character a stand-in for the media moguls who put up the money for *Gremlins 2* to exist at all, after no director but Dante would agree to bring it to fruition?

Whatever the answers to these questions might be, one thing remains clear: *Gremlins 2* was never intended to deliver an easily digestible continuation of its precursor. Revisiting the film more than two decades after its release, Joe Dante recalls his alternately static and symbiotic relationship with Warner Brothers during *Gremlins 2's* making; the film's spirited cultural

commentary;

working with everyone and everything from Rick Baker, to Christopher Lee, to animatronic puppets; and the built-in anarchy of the horror-comedy hybrid.

DIABOLIQUE: *Gremlins 2* places itself in the midst of corporate culture, being set in the Clamp Enterprises building. That choice of setting feels like an admission, on your part, that most sequels are corporate in nature—a kind of manufactured product.

JOE DANTE: It kind of came with the territory because, personally, there was no real reason for me to do a sequel to *Gremlins* other than to make money. The original picture was a very arduous picture to make, because there wasn't very much money, and everyone in the studio was just doing [executive producer Steven] Spielberg a favor. They weren't invested that much in the picture, and they didn't like it when they saw it. It was a big surprise to them when it was popular. And so, they decided they wanted to make a sequel, and asked me, but I had moved on from *Gremlins*. I didn't want to go back

there. They meddled around with it for about five more years, and they came back and they hadn't been able to fulfill the possibility of doing a sequel. They said that if I would do the sequel, they would let me do whatever I wanted. That's a very rare opportunity in Hollywood to take advantage of. I said "That's fine," and [screenwriter] Charlie [Haas] and Mike Finnell, the producer, set out to try and find something to hang on [laughs]. We basically came down to an approach that involved a movie that not only made fun of the original picture, but just of the idea of sequels in general. Then there was the fact that the '90s were coming on, and it was a brave new world out there. We just thought, "Why don't we just send it up?" and break the frame—a hell's-a-poppin', unexpected kind of movie. It isn't really the carbon copy of the first movie that most sequels are.

DIABOLIQUE: It's as if the gremlins are eating their own iconic image from the inside out.

JD: Yeah, that's what the movie is: "What if the gremlins made their own sequel to the original picture?" I don't know how they felt about that, but they were relieved to have us doing it, so they actually went ahead and let us do it the way we wanted it, which is pretty rare. There were aspects of the film that the audience had to buy, such as the rules that we made up. We were frankly a little nervous that the audience would just say, "These rules are so silly. We're not gonna pay attention." But I did learn a valuable lesson—that the audience wants a picture to be good, and if you let them down or confuse them in some way, they'll turn on you. So as long as we were consistent with the rules, they were

there to play along with the plot, and they liked the movie. But nonetheless, they were preposterous rules, and we immediately used that as an excuse to send them up in the sequel.

DIABOLIQUE: The film features sequences in which you have the gremlins surrounded by their own merchandise; Leonard Maltin reviewing the original *Gremlins*; an intermission with a rant from Hulk Hogan, etc. Were you ever concerned that including those more commercial elements would undermine the send-up you intended?

JD: There was some reluctance on the part of the studio to make fun of the merchandising. That was actually quite a battle, to keep that joke about the suction-cups on car doors at the end of the picture. But they had given their word that they were gonna let me make the movie that I wanted to make, with very few exceptions. They let me get away with just about everything.

DIABOLIQUE: Except for your title choice.

JD: Well, I was once on a movie called *Jaws 3, People o* which never got made, and I thought that that would be a funny title to use: *Gremlins 2, People o*. But they wanted to go the traditional way, and they put *The New Batch* in, which is not what I thought was a particularly attractive title.

DIABOLIQUE: It's strange that they allowed you to make your film in this incredibly self-referential and satirical fashion, but they wouldn't budge there. What was it about that insistence on the film's title that was such a big deal to the studio?

JD: They saw money [laughs]. It was a way to keep a franchise going, and, as you know, franchises are now the order of the day. There are many of them now. They've now taken over, and nobody wants to make a movie unless they can make five more of them. To them, they had a lot of hope riding on the idea that they would be making a lot of these pictures. The problem came when they suggested a release date of Memorial Day. That was discarded after they had run ads and TV spots for Memorial Day opening, because

"There was some reluctance on the part of the studio to make fun of the merchandising. But they had given their word that they were gonna let me make the movie that I wanted to make."

they had heard that *Dick Tracy* was going to open very big, and maybe break the box-office record that was being held by them with *Batman*. They had tried to move *Gremlins 2* back to June, to open opposite *Dick Tracy*, so that it didn't knock out *Batman*. The ads had been running, and people saw them again, and people thought "Is this a re-issue? Wasn't this picture already out?" And it didn't make the kind of money that it needed to make.

DIABOLIQUE: Between *Gremlins*, *Gremlins 2*, and even *Small Soldiers* later on, you always seem to find





yourself toying with monsters or antagonists who are miniature in size.
JD: Yeah. I mean, it's not intentional, believe me.

DIABOLIQUE: Do you think you became known by the studios as the go-to-guy for that sort of thing?

JD: My facility was special effects. I got offered *Small Soldiers* because there was nobody else in town at that time who could do comedy and special effects at the same time. But all the while, during *Small Soldiers*, I just kept thinking "This is *Gremlins* 3!" [laughs]. Later, in a movie called *The Hole*, I had this clown puppet, which kind of makes that *Gremlins* 4. It's just something that's kind of haunted me [laughs].

DIABOLIQUE: As far as the creatures themselves are concerned, Rick Baker was initially reluctant to do the FX work on *Gremlins* 2...

JD: He didn't really want to just come on board for a sequel, and have to listen to other people's ideas. When we made the original picture, he was off directing, and wasn't available to do the gremlins. The way that we got Rick on board was by saying that we were going to give him a lot of input, and let him create lots of different gremlins, so they didn't all have to be the same. Obviously we had to have Gizmo, we had to have a "bad" gremlin—but

otherwise, we were going to have a genetics subplot that would allow for different kinds of gremlins. Also, there was just the sheer number of gremlins that we were going to have, which was far more than the other picture. This one was three times the cost of the first movie. To his everlasting satisfaction [laughs], the technology had improved. Now, there were things that we were unable to do in the first movie, like have the gremlins walk around, talk and things like that. Now the technology existed to do that. We were able to be much freer in the way we portrayed the gremlins on the second movie.

DIABOLIQUE: Once he was on board, how did you go about fleshing out that mob of gremlins we see in the final product?

JD: He was there on script conferences, and we came up with the idea of the genetics lab and the kind of film that we were going to have. We came up with many more [ideas] that made it into the film, but then he just started operating on all cylinders. We came up with a bunch of great sequences, being aware that the Christopher Lee character undergoes his transformation and turns into Einstein, and a whole lot of other characters. It was



all peripheral to the story we were telling, and we could only have so many, so a lot of the creatures we designed just couldn't make it into the picture.

DIABOLIQUE: When a film like *Gremlins* 2 sustains such an erratic tone throughout, there probably comes a time when things need to be reigned in a bit.

JD: Yeah, because then it just becomes a series of gags, which it really is. And then the question becomes "Well, here's a gag, and here's how much it's gonna cost, and here's how much time it's gonna take... Is this funny enough to be worth it, or should we be using our efforts for something else?"

DIABOLIQUE: That feeling, of things being a "series of gags," is rooted in a sense that many of the film's sequences seem improvised. When you were shooting those stand-out moments that put each gremlin front and center, did you decide that you were going to improvise beyond what was laid out in the script?

JD: There's a lot of improvisation that happens when making these pictures, because the puppet movies are all dependent on what the puppets can do and what they can't do. In the first picture, we ended up shifting quite a bit from what was written because we just couldn't do it. We had to come up with other ways of getting our plot points across. Gizmo couldn't walk around, so we had to have a backpack that we could carry him around in. In the first picture, he was never supposed to last more than a couple of reels anyway. He was

"The general bromide is that all these movies are storyboarded in advance. The storyboards are there to guide you, but once you get there, a whole lot of other possibilities are there, and it's a matter of making the best choices."

supposed to turn into Stripe after about the third reel. It was only into about the third week of shooting that Steven Spielberg decided he liked Gizmo so much that he wanted him to stick around for the whole movie, and we really didn't have the technological capabilities to make him carry the movie. So, we frantically scrambled to build a big head, and do all sorts of tricks to make this little bag of bolts look like he was alive. We managed to pull it off, but again, so much of that is made up on the spot—which you can do in a puppet movie, because we've got the puppets right there.





With CGI it's a little more difficult.

DIABOLIQUE: What's it like doing improv with inanimate objects?

JD: It's [about] the puppeteers. You're working with the puppeteers, and they're coming up with stuff: "Look, you can pick this up and throw it!" Or, when he does the "ACID: DO NOT THROW IN FACE" gag, I mean, that was just made up that morning, you know? There was a certain looseness, particularly during the second half of the movie, when they're doing their dancing and singing and conga lines, and all that kind of stuff. That's stuff where you just go into the prop room and you go into the costumes, and you figure what you're gonna do, and you shoot it.

Any kind of improv the actors do is occasioned by what the puppets are doing. There are many moments in both movies where the actors are reacting to something that they didn't expect the puppets to do. In the first movie, we had a dog who thought Gizmo was real, so we got a lot of great stuff with this dog, because he was fascinated by what he thought was this strange creature that he had never seen before. And of course, if actors are in the scene, they have to use that. So both those movies are looser than they appear to be. The general bromide is that all these movies are storyboarded in advance. You have storyboards, but that's really not the case.

"Donald Trump and Ted Turner were in the news. So we figured, 'Why not take them and combine them into a character, and then use all the foibles that are associated with both of them?'"

The storyboards are there to guide you so that you can do what you're supposed to do, but once you get there, a whole lot of other possibilities are there, and it's a matter of making the best choices.

DIABOLIQUE: The voices of each grem-

lin are integral to the manic tone that *Gremlins 2* takes on. Being an actor's director is one thing, but being a voice-over actor's director must be something else entirely.

JD: I started doing trailers, so I was always directing narrators when I started out. Certainly in the case of the first *Gremlins* movie, we had a lot of people—some of them whose voices never made it into the picture. In *Gremlins 2*, the only one we pre-recorded was Tony Randall's, because we had to move the lips of the character to match what he had said. We were stuck with whatever he had recorded, because we couldn't change that. We could change anything around it, but we couldn't change that while we were shooting. They had invented this device called a gilderfluke; I can't really explain to you what it is, but it was an iconic way of making the lips of the puppet move in "A", "E", "I", "O", and "U" formations, like an animated cartoon. It really was uncanny. Of course now that technology is obsolete, but at the time it was quite groundbreaking.

Luckily, by the time we did the second picture, we already knew Howie [Mandel] was going to do the voice, and we knew what it was like. The gremlins' voices were pretty much established. Once we came up with different characters, like the Daffy character, the one that looks like Edward G. Robinson—those characters we had to come up with new voices for. But since they don't talk, generally, it's really squeaky voices and sentence fragments, basically, that you'd come up with. Some of those can be left till the very end. It's just a matter of how much mouth movement you want to get on camera.

DIABOLIQUE: One of the fascinating things about the casting of *Gremlins 2* is that you have Robert Prosky's Grandpa Fred character, who's trying to escape his typecasting as a horror host and become a journalist, and then on the same set, you have Christopher Lee, who's lamented being pigeonholed by genre work in real life.

JD: We actually had a scene—it's in the outtake reel—of [Christopher Lee] look-

ing at this vampire bat, ruminating about how it feeds on blood. It was a very funny bit, but unfortunately, that scene was quite long, and at the first preview I just kept getting flop sweat, thinking "When is the movie gonna stop?" So that came out. He was very good natured about doing the gag. I had been told that he was very brusque and unapproachable, and I didn't find him that way at all.

DIABOLIQUE: Did that parallel ever strike you at any point—Lee's history vs. Grandpa Fred's story in the film?

JD: Eh, not so much. The Grandpa Fred character was based on Al Lewis, who, after he did *The Munsters*, still kept that Grandpa Munster character. I don't know if Al Lewis ever wanted to be a journalist [laughs]. He was hosting a horror movie host show in the basement of a building when I was in Atlanta on another movie, doing a location scout. I went down into the basement, and I remember seeing him introducing these movies, and I thought "This is really sad. This is a really crappy set for this old trooper to be working in." And that's when I thought he'd be a good character to add to *Gremlins 2*. We didn't ask him to play it. I can't remember why. But Robert Prosky was great. He got it right away completely. He understood what was going on.

DIABOLIQUE: The general consensus has been that *Gremlins* possesses a much meaner, creepy streak to it, whereas *Gremlins 2* works more as a zany live-action cartoon. Was there any point during the shooting of sequences in *Gremlins 2* where your intent was to "go for the scare"?

JD: Well, there has to be a certain amount of tension in order for the picture to work. You have to believe that the characters are in danger. Certainly the scene with the shredder, which is the counterpart to the microwave scene in the first picture—it's in there to show people that "Yeah, we really are serious. We are trying to make a horror picture even though we're making fun of it."

DIABOLIQUE: You could also balance seriousness and fun by drawing from the '90s-era social climate that was

starting to rear its head.

JD: I think the key to it was the fact that both Donald Trump and Ted Turner were in the news. So we figured, "Why not take them and combine them into a character, and then use all the foibles that are associated with both of them?" Of course, with Turner, that gave us access to the cable channels, which, at the time, were just burgeoning. People were just getting their cable. So we could do jokes like "The Archery Channel", and people would say "Well, that's just ridiculous! That'll never happen!" There probably would be five archery channels now. I mean, there's a channel for everything. So we were kind of on the cutting edge of that.

Then there's the developer angle of it; Daniel Clamp is developing everything in New York. In the script, he starts out as the bad guy, but then, because of the way John Glover played him, we realized that he was actually much more funny and interesting than we had planned. So he ended up becoming sympathetic. One of the funniest things for me is something that most people don't pick up on, which is that scene where John Glover puts on the "end of the world" tape, which they air on the cable station when the world ends. That's an actual copy of the tape that Ted Turner actually had, that they would put on at the end of the world. And I think there was a colorization joke in there, too, but we had to take it out, because *The Big Picture* came out before we did, and they had a colorization joke [laughs].

DIABOLIQUE: How have you come to understand the horror-comedy hybrid? Do you find that comedy tends to be derived from horror, or that it's the other way around?

JD: I was always attracted to combinations of horror and comedy: the James Whale movies; obviously *Abbott and Costello Meet Frankenstein* is a touchstone in that genre. But interestingly, the comedy and the horror are separate in it. When I started out making pictures for Roger Corman, and certainly when I made *The Howling*, these movies weren't taken very seriously at all. Most people found them laughable. It always seemed to me that if

you give people a place to laugh, then they can laugh and get it out of their system. You also disarm them a bit, so that they're more relaxed, so that you can hit them with something unexpected. The horror genre itself is basically based on absurdity. In order for the audience to accept the absurdity of something, and in order for it to work, they have to acknowledge it a bit. That's pretty much my guiding principle to making these pictures.

The genre in general is a crux. For every *Shaun of the Dead*, there's a number of pictures that are imitations of it that don't work—particularly the zombie genre, which in my lifetime has gone from pretty much reviled to the biggest cable show on TV, and this mega-budget *World War Z* zombie movie. I continually marvel that the one genre that was so looked down upon when I was a kid, and so dismissed, is now the only genre that people can expect to make money with. Genre movies, they've never stopped. They keep on going. It's an interesting turn of events for a kid whose parents said "You shouldn't watch that trash!"

DIABOLIQUE: So, would you say your time with these little guys is still "haunting" you?

JD: Only when I'm made to watch the movie at film festivals.

DIABOLIQUE: [Laughs] Really? You tend to cringe when you revisit the *Gremlins* franchise?

JD: No, I like the movie. But listen—there's plenty of movies I love, but you can't see them too often. You have to not see things for a little while in order to be surprised by them. That whole concept of "Which movie would you take to a desert island?"... Well, it doesn't matter which movies you'd take, because you be pretty sick of 'em!

DIABOLIQUE: Having been attached to the film since it's making, there's some part of you that probably wants to let it go—which is what *Gremlins 2* is about, in a way. It's about tearing down the whole brand, dropping the mic and going home.

JD: And not having *Gremlins 3*.

by Max Weinstein



HEALING THE WOUNDS

Under the Skin of Jess Franco

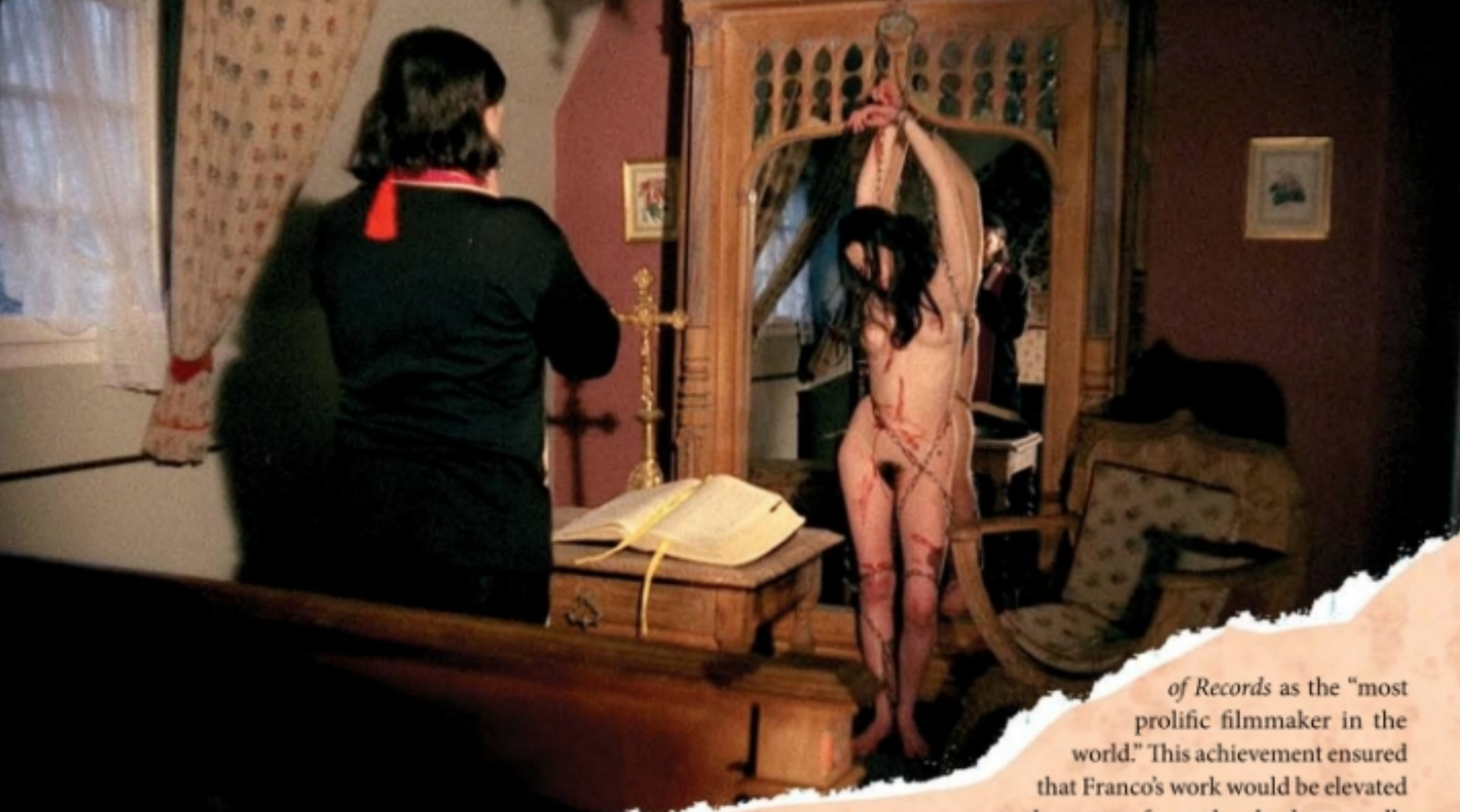
Founder of Redemption Films, Nigel Wingrove, commemorates the profane and prolific work of the late exploitation helmer.

JESS FRANCO: A man who made some 200 films and yet, outside of a niche fan base, is relatively unknown, a figment of no imagination but his own. Yet already Franco's spectre, ghostly camera in hand, is rising from the ashes, refusing, even in death, to stay dead, as critics and fans alike finally begin to take stock of one of the most individualistic directors the film world has ever produced.

Jesús Franco died on April 2, 2013 aged 82 of a heart attack, which given his propensity for cigarettes and alcohol is hardly surprising. He had also just finished what was to be his last film, *Al Pereira*

vs. *the Alligator Ladies*, in which naked flesh vies with confused actors and surreal camera angles while an all but incomprehensible plot tries to hold everything together. Such was the car crash that Franco's cinematic output had become in recent years, where over-lavish praise and largesse from besotted fans, immured to the filmic travesties Franco was now producing and eager for more of the same, had enabled Franco to eek out and sustain a meagre living producing increasingly dire and depressing works. Films which, as much by default as by design, would occasionally offer glimpses of an earlier, sometimes brilliant, director.

It was those tantalising promises of a return to for-



mer glories that in many ways kept both the core fans coming back for more and Franco himself returning again and again to filmmaking. This indulgence of Franco by a clusterfuck of awestruck fans was akin to a once great, but now faded popstar, recording one interminable track after another, knowing that a besotted coterie of admirers and completists would buy it, analyse it, and heap praise upon it as if it were the work of a revered shaman or lost prophet. Such reverence, well intentioned and motivated as much by a fondness for Franco the man as for his films, enabled Franco the obsessive-compulsive to continue to make films long after his sell-by date had passed, and equally

indulged the worst aspect of fandom's trainspotteriness in which quantity won out over quality, and profanity was mistaken for prolificacy.

Indeed Franco's output, colossal even in the late 1960s and early 1970s when his career was at its peak, was a symptom not of brilliance, but of flawed genius. Why else would a director feel the need to secretly be filming a second film on the set of a commissioned work to the ultimate detriment of both? It is sad, too, that in later years the driving source and *raison d'être* for much of the wider interest in Jess Franco, the director would be in unravelling the multiple versions and releases of many of his films rather than the content itself. Franco's output had in a sense become the trees in the wood that no one could see, the culmination being his inclusion in the *Guinness Book*

of Records as the "most prolific filmmaker in the world." This achievement ensured that Franco's work would be elevated to the status of complex dead sea scrolls in film form, over which Franco disciples could pontificate and conjecture on running times, edits and lost releases for millennia to come.

Putting aside Jess Franco's later filmic chafe and prodigious output, what attracts most about Franco's films is his almost delirious wallowing in Sadien excess, sexual depravity and exploitative violence, which, had Franco had access to bigger budgets and more convincing prosthetics, would, I am sure, have produced scenes that would have surpassed anything our current cinema can offer. In titles like *Exorcism* and *Sadomania* for example, Franco is able to mix implied and actual sexual violence with an almost drooling lust and unrestrained sadism. In the case of *Exorcism* and its various reinventions as *Demoniac* and *The Sadist of*



Notre Dame, Franco himself portrays a defrocked priest driven to rape and murder after witnessing a (faux) Black Mass with an almost gleeful relish.

Franco's overriding use of (and obvious delight in) graphic sexual sadism, violence, abused women, and the almost casual antiestablishmentism pervaded not just his films, but his whole life, and has its seeds in the city, the country and the times that he grew up in—that is, 1930s and 1940s Spain, and its capital city of Madrid, in which he was born. Here was a country torn apart by what is generally regarded as one of the most brutal Civil Wars the world has ever seen, and which witnessed acts of barbarism by Fascist Nationalists against left wing Republicans and civilians and vice versa. It also saw the collaboration of the Catholic church with General Franco's Falangists and, in turn, saw nuns and priests murdered by Republicans, anarchists and communists, with even the dead bodies of the religious dug up and mutilated, and their churches burned and desecrated.

This was the world in which the young boy and teenage Jess Franco would have grown up in. A world of extreme violence, passion, political activism and intense creativity—a world whose influence is so unshakable that it spawned the likes of Picasso's extraordinary anti-war painting, *Guernica*, which was inspired by the Nationalist bombing of the village the painting is named after.

The capital city of Madrid where he was born and raised saw clashes between nationalist Falangist groups and members of the socialist Assault Guards cause a military uprising, which started the entire Spanish Civil War in 1936, when Franco was aged six. This made the suppression of Madrid essential in the eyes of the General [Francisco] Franco-led nationalists. The subsequent battle for control of Madrid lasted over three years and saw the city shelled and laid siege to, with appalling atrocities committed by both sides, including the murder of 12,000 nationalist prisoners and the deaths of many, many civilians sympathetic to the Republican side—all of which the young Jess Franco could not help but be aware of, and even possibly have witnessed on occasions.

At the end of the civil war, Spain became a dictatorship, having been ostensibly neutral during the second war, though as a quasi-Fascist state it had been pro Nazi Germany and pro Mussolini's Fascist Italy. It was also a country in which the Catholic church had been actively involved in supporting the nationalist cause.

As a teenager in the '40s and a young man in the '50s, Jess Franco grew up in a military dictatorship where dissent, dissident views and opposition to the state risked imprisonment, forced labour and occasionally the death penalty. As a country, post-war Spain successfully embraced liberal economics and mended bridges with Western democracies in a combination of policies which resulted in the Spanish Miracle—the longest period of improvement in

"Franco's overriding use of graphic sexual sadism, violence, abused women, and the almost casual antiestablishmentism pervaded not just his films, but his whole life."





“His at times detrimental and obsessional need to make films meant that Franco could not fade gracefully into the sunset, but rather linger in the wings long after the curtains had closed.”

economic and social conditions in Spanish history. This was a country enjoying economic growth, but artistic, social and political restraint under an Authoritarian regime. In contrast, Franco was part of a younger Spanish generation desperate for change and radical creativity.

For Franco, that creative release would come relatively quickly, as he began working as an assistant director on a number of Spanish films in the '50s when he was in his early 20s, including Juan Antonio Bardem's *Cómicos* (1954) and a number of Hollywood features, like *Solomon and Sheba* (1958). His first feature, *Tenemos 18 Años* (1959), was a comedy in its own right, which he directed at age 29, just as the '60s dawned—from which point Franco would work and make films continually until his death some 52 years later.

Prolific to the point of absurdity, Franco's prodigious output from this point would vary from the truly creative *Succubus* and *Vampyros Lesbos*; to the fabulously exploitative *Female Vampire*, *The Demons* and *Justine*; through to the tedious *Esmeralda Bay* and *Snakewoman*; to the virtually unwatchable *Paula-Paula* and *Al Pereira vs. the Alligator Women*. Yet in many ways, Franco was a much more accomplished film director than is the impression given by some of his lesser films. Had he perhaps remembered the wise saying that sometimes less is more, Franco might have concentrated on making one good film rather than ten bad ones. For when he got it right, as he did with films like *Justine*, *Succubus* and *Virgin Among the Living Dead*, he showed a real creative and artistic flair coupled with the moments of surreal brilliance on display in his *Lorna the*

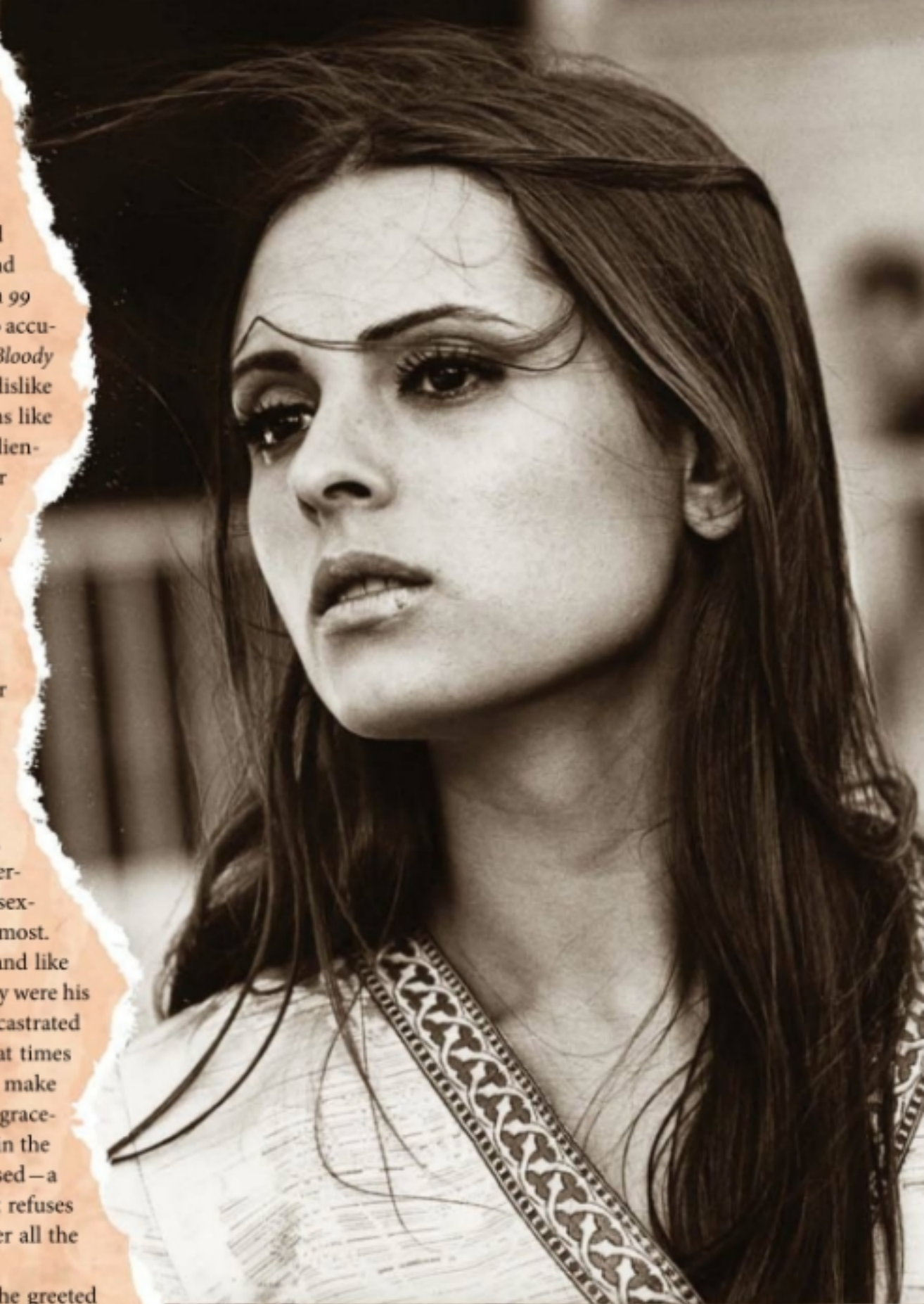
Exorcist and the greatly underrated *Nightmares Come at Night*. This was a man who, like his contemporary, Jean Rollin, was his own worst enemy.

Franco's reputation, too, would progress: from minor critical acclaim and brief flirtations with the mainstream in 99 *Women* and *The Blood of Fu Manchu*; to accusations of misogyny with titles like *The Bloody Judge* and *Justine de Sade*; through to dislike and pariah status as the sadism of films like *Sadomania* and *Woman Behind Bars* alienated genre critics, mainstream horror fans pushed Franco more and more into the ghetto of sadistic pornography. Indeed, by the late '70s and '80s, Franco was effectively finished as a commercial film director, and this should, as he was now in his '50s, have heralded either a slow exit, a career change, or retirement, and this is perhaps where Franco's obsessional film making and the precarious nature of the film business merged.

The film industry has no pensions, no retirement plans and attracts mavericks and dreamers; exploitation and sexploitation cinema attracts more than most. All Franco could do was make films, and like Jean Rollin, Lucio Fulci and others, they were his life. Without them, he was creatively castrated and financially barren. That, plus his at times detrimental and obsessional need to make films, meant that Franco could not fade gracefully into the sunset, but rather linger in the wings long after the curtains had closed—a bit like a guest at a cocktail party that refuses to take the hint that it's time to go after all the other guests had left.

When I eventually met Franco, he greeted me with something along the lines of “Thank God for Redemption”—not because *Redemption* is particularly wonderful, but because we had, as with Rollin and other directors, released and introduced his films to a new audience for the first time since their cinema release. We were reinvigorating their careers.

Yet in Franco's case, it almost didn't happen. 20 years ago, *Redemption* Films released *Succubus*, and I received a written warning from the British Board of Film Classification stating that Jess Franco was a di-





rector whose films the BBFC regarded as bordering on criminal. I was told that were I to attempt to release other films by him or to bring them into the country, there would be consequences. A year later, I submitted *Demoniac* and *Sadomania*, and both were categorically banned with the implicit threat that by pushing the work of Jess Franco I was championing criminal sexual material, and that if I continued, I too would face not civil, but criminal proceedings. I mention this for the first time because I want to convey just how much of a pariah Jess Franco was considered to be.

These are two quotes from the BBFC to my solicitors which show just how close to having criminal proceedings issued against Redemption



we were for trying to champion Jess Franco:

SADOMANIA: "...it is grossly unsuitable for viewing in the home. Few, if any, of the sex scenes are consenting...women that persistently refuse to succumb to the sadistic prison regime are systematically tortured, humiliated or degraded, often for the purpose of arousing the impotent male governor and through him the male viewer of the video work. ...There is no doubt in our minds that the erotic presentation of such scenes would be found depraving and corrupting by a British jury."

DEMONIAC: "...The Board has never granted a BBFC certificate to any film or video which seeks to encourage sexual sadism, and this film is clearly sadistic in that it seems 'to have no purpose or justification other than to reinforce or sell the idea that it can be highly pleasurable to inflict injury, pain or humiliation (often in a sexual context) on others' (Home Office Report on Obscenity and Film Censorship, Williams, HMSO, 1979)..."

"...The work of this particular filmmaker has often fallen well outside the parameters of BBFC standards because of the manner in which it presents scenes of vicious sexual violence or of violence to women in a sexually arousing context, offering little pleasure to the viewer other than a conscious vicarious gratification of misogyny. Where such emotions focus on the harming of others, the Board must always consider drawing a line, as we have in refusing a video certificate to *Demoniac*."

Redemption Films challenged the banning of these films, along with *Bare Behind Bars*, legally, and lost. We then sought and won leave to judicially review the BBFC's entire operation, a massive undertaking and one which would have, had we pursued it, opened up all the machinations of the BBFC's internal workings to public scrutiny. However, we ran out of money and had to wait until our battle over pornography several years later to finally

oust the BBFC chairman James Ferman, which in turn heralded in a period of more liberal censorship.

We did, however, release two more Jess Franco films in this period: *She Killed in Ecstasy* and, most memorably, *Vampyros Lesbos*, the latter of which became a massive seller, its sales ironically not driven by the films visual content, but by its soundtrack. Released as *Vampyros Lesbos: Sexadelic Dance Party*, Franco's work was suddenly trendy in a new way, attracting a whole new audience among Europe's burgeoning dance and club scene.

Now, Jess Franco is rightly something of a legend. For all his contradictions, successes and failures, accusations of sadism, and inability to produce anything of real worth for the last 20 or so years, Franco was, and is, a true hero of exploitation cinema. A man who loved, ate and slept film. A man who, despite the BBFC's vicious accusation that he was a misogynistic sadist, loved and enjoyed women, as anyone who saw his puppy-like devotion to wife Lina Romay over nearly 40 years would know. A man who, in his heart, was an artist, and like most artists had his flaws and weaknesses, but ultimately could do nothing else but create. Franco may have used a camera rather than a paintbrush and film instead of a canvas, but that was because film was his blood, and he only stopped filming when his blood stopped flowing and his heart, like his camera, finally stopped.

Jess Franco, reunited with Lina Romay, for one last kiss.

Fade to black.

by Nigel Wingrove





For horror-comedy troupe Astron-6, expression and exposure don't come without a fight.

The Anti-Establishment ESTABLISHMENT

ON THE CUTTING EDGE

ASTRON-6 MAY OR may not be living the dream, depending on who you ask. Although the five-piece Canadian filmmaking outfit, formed after their first meeting at the Winnipeg Short Film Festival, have managed to indulge their childhood obsessions with a handful of shoe-string budget productions to critical acclaim and a slew of awards, the group has come to learn that sometimes, striving to stay young through one's art can further accelerate the aging process. Astron-6 (which consists of Adam Brooks, Jeremy Gillespie, Matthew Kennedy, Steven Kostanski and Conor Sweeney) holds fast to one objective: the collective aims to create a brand of pulp that's accessible to a broad spectrum of film-goers, but whose parts draw from the surreal, obscure and extreme to set the stage for Brooks, Kennedy and Sweeney's comedic rapport. Despite this seemingly tangible feat, however, the releases of Astron-6's first full-length feature, *Father's Day*, didn't position them into the cult circles whose support they enjoy today without their share of jumping through creative, financial and censorial hoops to get there.

Father's Day follows the unlikely trio of one-eyed assassin Ahab (Brooks), humble priest Father Sullivan (Kennedy) and male street hooker Twink (Sweeney) as they hunt down the deranged Chris Fuchman (Mackenzie Murdock), a serial murderer and rapist whose victims all happen to be dads. For those on the film's receiving end, Astron-6's pairing with Lloyd Kaufman and Michael Herz's cult juggernaut Troma Entertainment to produce the film seems ideally suited to usher in this gold standard for Astron-6's absurdist blend of shock and schlock. What audiences and critics were blissfully unaware of, we learn, were the tensions that boiled beneath the surface of its making. Says Sweeney: "We were thrilled to have the opportunity to work with [Troma] and I wish that it hadn't ended acrimoniously, but we learned very quickly that what you see in the little intro

sketches before your DVDs is not really what's going on behind the curtain."

The acrimonious ending to Astron-6 and Troma's collaborative efforts Sweeney alludes to is well-documented in the collective's making-of documentary, *No Sleep No Surrender*; following their outright refusal to blend in some of Kaufman's "Tromatic" script notes, *Father's Day*'s cast and crew lived under the constant threat of their film being denied the theatrical release it was initially promised, and instead being relegated to direct-to-DVD distribution. "We wanted other people to see the ludicrous ideas [Kaufman] tried to bully us into using," Sweeney explains. "They would not give us our production check until we incorporated their homophobic, sexist, toilet humor nonsense into the script, so I wrote a draft with each of Lloyd's script suggestions, sent it to them, got our check,

green screen. If need be, we would very sloppily place them in and see how that cut went over." Adds Brooks: "I thought the suggestions were so hilariously laugh-out-loud awful that people might get a kick out of them. They had no place in the actual film though."

Kaufman, whose iconic persona and sheer volume of output in the world of underground horror-comedy filmmaking is unprecedented, becomes something of an antagonist in *No Sleep Surrender*, his reputation seemingly shattered by Astron-6's audacity to challenge his authorial control. The guys are quick to point out, however, that their doc's narrative isn't so black and white. "I don't think we ever discussed shattering any illusions," says Brooks. "We're just presenting our point of view."



Photo by Leif Norman

and immediately trashed that script and shot our version of the movie."

Kennedy verifies Sweeney's assertions on the unused sequences, noting: "They were shot as a safety net. We didn't want him to pull the plug on the whole production if we refused to use them, so we wanted the option of making a cut with them in the picture; this is why the suggested gags were shot in front of a

"All we decided was that we wanted *No Sleep No Surrender* to tell the real story of independent filmmaking," Kennedy says of the documentary's intention, "what it's really like to be a nobody with nothing and try to chase your dream the only way you know how."

"If you ever want to have some sort of existential self awakening about the fragility of life, pick up a few pigs' worth of organs and disassemble them in your bathtub."

A lot of the lessons and experiences we had along the way should be shared with other independent filmmakers. There is a lot to learn and a lot to endure. We would have loved to have seen *No Sleep No Surrender* ourselves before experiencing it."

Gillespie, co-writer/co-director/composer of *Father's Day*, adds: "I would hope that *No Sleep No Surrender* gives people an insight into what it's like making a movie for nothing. Filmmaking isn't pretty. It isn't just hanging out with your friends and having a good time. It's extremely hard and depressing work."

Of the many ebbs and flows of *Father's Day*'s production, an all-time low of Astron-6's shooting schedule came when staging a sequence in which Murdock's Fuchman character's dingy basement dwellings are covered in

actual pig guts, in order that they simulate the human kind. "Worse than being gross, it ended up being a major philosophical moment for the three of us," Sweeney says. "A pig's insides are almost identical to a person's, so we were made vividly aware of everything that is keeping the factory that is our body running, and how delicate all these major organs are. If you ever want to have some sort of existential self awakening about the fragility of life, pick up a few pigs' worth of organs and disassemble them in your bathtub."

Brooks also attests to this morally deflating aspect of *Father's Day*'s production: "I remember a general depression that enveloped us for days afterwards. Pig guts stink like shit, puke and rotting blood, because they are full of those things. Matt, Conor and I tried to clean them in my bathtub, cutting and squeezing and rinsing. I remember gagging a couple times. Thankfully none of us had to roll around naked in them—we have Mackenzie [Murdock] to thank for that!"

"It was awful. We got those guts for free and were thrilled—until we found out

that they were literally everything fresh out of a pig's stomach," Kennedy recalls. "They were still full of everything that could make your car smell like death. We tried to separate the 'good' (shit-free) parts from the 'bad' (shit-filled) parts. We all started to feel a lot more conscious of our own mortalities after handling those guts and didn't want to eat any pork for several days. I eat pork again now."

States of depression and confrontations with mortality, though generally fear-inducing in nature, are a bit of a laughing matter for Astron-6; as seen in their faux-commercials, trailers, short films, and in the punk-spirited anti-climax of *Father's Day*, the collective tends to milk the inherent humor (if there is any to be found) in their characters' suicidal tendencies. "We find a lot of humor in the extremes," says Gillespie. "There's a funny juxtaposition when putting dark subject matter like murder and suicide next to absurdity like talking jackets."

Considering the reasons as to why moments in such works as *KrisMiss*, *Bio-Cop*, and *Father's Day* employ suicide as a comedic tool, Kennedy posits one theory:



"While it is rewarding making films with your friends for no money, it is also very depressing a lot of the time to live this life and fight this fight. I think we're all very comfortable joking about suicide because half the time we're all wishing we were brave enough to just kill ourselves. There's an ongoing joke about the Astron-6 suicide pact and this joke comes from the same desperation."

"I think we're all genuinely kind of waiting to see which of us does it first," jokes Sweeney, to which Brooks quips: "It's a call for help that has so far gone unanswered." Kostanski, Astron-6's resident FX artist and co-writer/director of *Manborg*, sees the matter slightly differently: "I actually don't find suicide that funny. Unless the person in question is a mutant cop that is in a constant state of agony because he's melting all the time [as in *Bio-Cop*], and wants nothing more than to end his shitty life. Then it's funny."

Astron-6's fascination with extremes has also lead them to some unforeseen push-back from censors. *Father's Day*'s prolonged shots of its main antagonist's propensity for genital self-mutilation, for example, were met by the Australian Classification Board with their dreaded rating of "RC"—that is, "Refused Classification"—in October 2012. Maintaining the happy warrior mentality, however, the crew have accepted the obstruction from authorities down under as a certificate of the film's authenticity.

"I think it's hilarious," says Gillespie. "It's like we made a video nasty. Most horror films these days try to fake that kind of notoriety. The idea of banning movies in this day and age is ridiculous. I have no fear about people not being able to find it. If anything, I think it will cause more people to see it. It's great advertising to be able to say it's been 'Banned in Australia!'" Likewise, Kennedy acknowledges the exposure *Father's Day*'s controversial elements have spawned: "The ban was fun press while it lasted. It hasn't changed anything about [us], but it will be fun to tell people. It's somewhat of an honor to be banned. It doesn't seem to happen nearly as much as it used to in the video

nasty days."

What with their films' manic shifts in tone and their general disregard for pre-written rules that inform the making of each, Astron-6 has garnered street cred among some of the most vital up-and-coming and established filmmakers working in both horror and comedy, as they continue to penetrate cult circles and film festivals as the anti-establishment establishment of their chosen subgenre. Following *Dark Sky Films*' markedly less contentious distribution of *Manborg*, Astron-6 has seen recognition by way of social media shout-outs from such artists as Don Coscarelli, Bobcat Goldthwait, Eli Roth and fellow Canadian rising stars Jason Eisener and Jen and Sylvia Soska. And yet, the boys are handling their exposure with the same amount of self-deprecation as their on-screen personas regularly display. "Imagining these established filmmakers saying the name *Manborg* in any context is funny to me," jokes Kostanski. "I need to start making movies with more legitimate sounding titles. A lot of the credit for all the celebrity attention needs to go to the marketing team, who really pushed the movie into the public eye. Normally I just show my stuff at a few festivals, and that's it. This movie has performed well beyond any expectations I might have had, and all this attention is good motivation to keep making stuff."

Sweeney is equally as proud of the collective's films' reception, even if his pride is mitigated by the impersonality that comes with online exchanges. "[It's] definitely cool, but it feels like smoke and mirrors when it's over the internet," he says. "There's such a disassociation when an Eli Roth or Bobcat Goldthwait gives you a shout out and you have no way to contact them. Even so, Bobcat Goldthwait is a hero of mine so it's great that we're on his radar at all."

"It feels great! Having said that, it's very short-lived," Brooks adds. Gillespie agrees: "It's great to know there's a network of support out there from other filmmakers, since it's an uphill battle getting people to see your movie, and we've been very lucky

in that regard. But you shouldn't get too pleased with yourself, because it doesn't last forever."

"It's pretty crazy to think they are seeing our hard work," Kennedy admits. Still, the admission is more of a short-term fix than a temporary solution to the burdens of no-budget filmmaking. "Does it make it any easier to get out of bed in the morning? No. I still believe in the Astron-6 suicide pact. We're all jumping off of Hoover Dam after [their upcoming giallo horror-comedy] *The Editor* comes out. Not Steve [Kostanski] though. That boy has a bright future."

It's telling that *The Editor*, Astron-6's in-development feature about a revered-editor-of-exploitation-films-turned-murder-suspect, is currently seeking crowd-sourced funding with an IndieGoGo campaign, rather than relying on the promises of any one distribution outfit to guide their creative and promotional processes. But be that as it may, it's safe to bet that their harboring of resentment of past production quarrels is more a humorous defense mechanism than an exercise in self-pity. Says Gillespie: "Dealing with Troma was a learning experience. They've made a lot of decisions that I wouldn't make. But the movie is out there for people to see, so I don't really give it much thought anymore. Life goes on. It deserves to be said that *Father's Day* wouldn't exist if it weren't for Troma. I remember that we had just finished [their short film] *Cool Guys*; Matt was moving to Vancouver to go to film school; Steve and I were moving to Toronto, and there was kind of a sense that things were ending. And that's when we got the offer to make *Father's Day* for next to nothing. So that kept us going in a way. And, despite the odds, we came out with a movie that we're pretty proud of."

For now, Astron-6 can take the guns out of their mouths and put them in the movies, where they belong.

by Max Weinstein



WITH **YOU'RE NEXT**,
ADAM WINGARD LETS
HIMSELF INTO THE HOUSE
OF **MAINSTREAM HORROR**

ONE DOES NOT have to be a hardcore horror devotee to realize that the genre is having an identity crisis. Following the decreasing and unpredictable presence of Eli Roth and Alexandre Aja, both of whom were slated to lead the horror field similarly to John Carpenter and Wes Craven following the era of the somewhat misjudged "torture porn" era, horror fans have been aimlessly drifting away from unification within their community.

In the mainstream horror arena, established genre directors such as Guillermo del Toro and Sam Raimi have thrown effective curveballs at the community in producing capacities whilst remaining selective about their directorial work—which, in effect, allowed Oren Peli and the found-footage revolution to take hold of the zeitgeist. Throw in James Wan's determination to rejuvenate the haunted house film, as well as Rob Zombie's horror swan song *The Lords of Salem*, and it becomes clear the horror commu-

nity hasn't been able to find the film to break down the constrictive creative barriers that *Paranormal Activity* and *The Devil Inside*'s financial success cemented.

In the independent scene, however, things have been much more divisive, leading to a separation between two burgeoning aesthetics. On one hand, the work of Adam Green, Tom Six and Darren Bousman have inspired a return to bloody exhibitions of practical gore and twisted self-indulgence that helps define a loyal, yet hostile cult audience. On the opposite hand, the works of Ti West, Ben Wheatley and Jim Mickle have invested in the art of tension, scaring off gorehounds in exchange for a rabid fan base of their own.

Although there are no guarantees, there is a hope that these two communities may bond within the independent scene, and that the face of big studio horror may be redefined by a film reminiscent of the genre's seemingly intangible glory days. Without assigning the status of a white knight, the community's best chance of achieving these goals may lie in the coincidental one-two punch from filmmaker Adam Wingard, as his

shepherded sequel to *V/H/S*, *V/H/S/2*, aims to surpass the original by leaps and bounds mere weeks before Lionsgate rolls out his long-awaited home invasion film, *You're Next*. While Wingard has previously built up a small following in the wake of his mumblecore efforts and his previous feature, *A Horrible Way to Die*, with *You're Next*, the filmmaker aims to catapult himself into the upper echelon, simultaneously pulling off a technically astounding, intense horror movie that can also be bloody, funny and absolutely entertaining.

You're Next has been something of a white whale following rave reviews out of 2011's Fantastic Fest and the Toronto International Film Festival, joining the

ranks of Oren Peli's *Area 51*, Joe Lynch's *The Knights of Badassdom* and Quentin Tarantino's *Kill Bill: The Whole Bloody Affair*. When the film was announced for a late summer release earlier this year, anticipation began to grow tenfold, only further bolstered by an effective and somewhat experimental advertising campaign, accentuated with optical-illusion posters for other Lionsgate releases and an audience-enticing trailer. But as impressive as the marketing on the film may be, there must be substance to any film to keep said audience after word-of-mouth spreads, especially in a world of such instantaneous criticism via social media.

In that regard, Wingard delivers with flying colors, offering a take on the home invasion film that doesn't subscribe



“We’re in a unique time. Horror is about to start back up again.”



to a singular theme or pattern; *You're Next* proves not only that he can make a horror film appealing to the masses, but that he can do so on his own accord, without the influences of the studio note process that accompanies any sizably budgeted effort. In the wake of the previously trendy exorcism and found footage films drawing in faltering returns, including *Paranormal Activity 4* and *The Last Exorcism Part II*, *You're Next* is in the gainful position of being counter-programming for mainstream horror audiences, much like the original *Paranormal Activity* had been counter-programming to Lionsgate's hit *Saw* franchise.

Wingard is just a man, inspired by a childhood of loving and making movies, and by no means does he intend to label himself. Rather, he consciously steers clear of the labels that accompany most up-and-coming filmmakers and auteurs, in order that he follow his instincts and learn from his mistakes. When speaking with *Diabolique*, Wingard's humble and articulate reactions to the praise given from *V/H/S/2*, *A Horrible Way to Die* and *You're Next* demonstrate that he doesn't take this creative success for granted. In the lexicon of classic genre storytellers, perhaps it's he who is next.

DIABOLIQUE: Following its festival run and well-received trailer, what are your expectations for *You're Next*? Do you think Lionsgate was smart to bide their time with the release?

ADAM WINGARD: My expectations have been met. I was most concerned, for the longest time with, "Is this movie going to come out in the way that I originally promised?" Unfortunately, right after Lionsgate bought up the movie at Toronto, they had that major Summit merger, and they ended up with a ton of movies on their plate that they couldn't all release. We ended up in this weird situation where movies are getting dropped that were originally promised on the schedules and so forth, from what I understand, just because they didn't have the slate for it. So we were kind of on the edge of our seats for a little while, not

knowing if we were gonna be next—no pun intended—or if they were gonna find a date. Fortunately, when *The Possession* came out in August of 2012, which was sort of an experimental date, I think they were seeing how far into the summer they could push with horror. This is all my take on it; I'm not sure if it's necessarily true. But that weekend *The Possession* came out, they contacted us that Saturday morning. I guess they had gotten the Friday numbers, they said, "This is the weekend we're going to put out *You're Next* next year, and we're really gonna start moving forward with this." Since then, it's been amazing. They've gone all out and they've done some pretty experimental ad campaign stuff just to get started, like outside of the box kind of thinking, and they cut a great trailer. So I'm pretty stoked.

DIABOLIQUE: The film seems poised to do well, since the late summer season has begun to lend itself better to genre films, like, as you said, *The Possession*, or *Rise of the Planet of the Apes*...

AW: We're in a unique time. Horror is about to start back up again. Once *Paranormal [Activity]* took over, and once the splatter porn thing was over, there was kind of a lull, because nobody wants to really compete with *Paranormal*, and there wasn't a real, solidified new "scene" going on, aside from *The Devil Inside* doing well. Found footage has never gone away, but nobody has understood exactly what to do with it. But fortunately, this year with *The Conjuring*, and *You're Next*, and *Insidious: Chapter 2*, and all that stuff, this could be a good year. I think we're overdue for some good horror movies.

DIABOLIQUE: *You're Next* appears to be one of the more brutal entries in your filmography. How did you and Simon [Barrett] take its concept from a simple idea to feature length?

AW: I had seen the French film *Them*, which I thought was really fun and scary. *Inside*, of course. *The Strangers*. The only type of horror movie I was responding to at the time was home invasion. But it was really when I was editing *A Horrible Way to Die* that I sat down and watched

the opening scene of *Scream*, and it really struck a nerve with me just how fun and tension-filled that was. I was able to remember when I was a kid watching it for the first time and how absolutely engaged I was. I talked to Simon and said, "I think this is the kind of movie we should think of doing next." Simon just took the references and inspirations that I'd told him about, and then he kind of did his own thing. The funny thing is, originally I wanted to do something that was even more like *Them* and *The Strangers*, where it was much more atmosphere-based, but fortunately, Simon recognized that he didn't want to do what we've seen before. Simon came at it with his own unique perspective, which was to take it to that *Scream* kind of thing, and really inject a good sense of humor into the whole thing.

DIABOLIQUE: Was there anything you wanted to prove with *You're Next*, following *A Horrible Way to Die*?

AW: Something that's important to realize about the genesis of a movie like *You're Next* is that, prior to that, we were doing movies for whatever budget we could afford and that we could just convince people to give us. We didn't have a lot to show for it, in terms of "these movies could make you money." So it was like, *A Horrible Way to Die*, we can get 70 grand to make it, so we made it for 70 grand. Before that, everything that I had done was even lower of a budget. *A Horrible Way to Die* was done in the way that it was done for budgetary reasons. I had to figure out a way to make that movie, period. Even though I've seen the movie originally in my head as being this more smooth, very-Steadicam driven film, when it came time to doing it, it was like we could only afford what we could afford, so I had to improvise and rely on good performances. Fortunately, we had great actors in that film. But when it came time after that was over, I knew that it was time to step it up and do something that was able to prove that I could make a movie by a standard of other filmmakers or film festival critics. I wanted to do something that normal, everyday people who didn't

"It doesn't mean anything to call yourself an 'artist.' A lot of times, it just means you're insecure, and you think people should worship you for just being yourself."

give a shit about movie references and so forth could enjoy just as much as people familiar with my work.

I also wanted to do something purely more technical. *A Horrible Way to Die* was so dialogue driven that I wanted to do something that focused on a different aspect. But when I first wanted to become a filmmaker as a little kid, the movies that inspired me were the *Star Wars* films and the *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle* movies, and then, later on, action films like the John Woo movies and early Robert Rodriguez, Tarantino and all that. When you focus early on your career, you go from figuring out creative ways to get these movies made to getting to make the movies you really want to make deep down inside. Whenever there's an opportunity to get at least enough money to make a movie like *You're Next*, it's very rewarding to kind of get back to the core of what made you want to be a filmmaker, and that is to try to entertain audiences in the way that you would want to be entertained. That doesn't mean I still don't want to do stuff that's experimental, but

you can't just say, "This is who I am, and I do the Adam Wingard style"—whatever the hell that would be. It's important that you be like, "Remember—you are a filmmaker and you make movies for people to watch, and occasionally, that involves having to work really hard on a movie that's for them entirely."

DIABOLIQUE: There are a lot of filmmakers fresh out of film school who only want to be "artists." But a filmmaker is supposed to be a storyteller first, and as a storyteller, why would you want to restrict your narrative?

AW: The label of people calling themselves "artists" can be such a false front that people put up, because it doesn't mean anything to call yourself an "artist." A lot of times, it just means you're insecure and that you think people should worship you for just being yourself. That's fine, and some people can pull that off, but just making art doesn't require putting a label on it. If you feel like you have to put a label on it and call yourself an artist... half the time those are the people who are exactly the opposite of what they are. **DIABOLIQUE:** *You're Next* features an incredible cast of indie genre actors. Was it important for you to garner up a band of outsiders rather than commercially recognizable talent?

AW: A lot of the parts were written for people we knew. So AJ [Bowen], Joe [Swanberg], Amy [Seimetz], Ti [West]—for those people, Simon specifically wrote the parts for them, because we already knew that they were great, dependable and that we wanted to work with them again. Everybody else we had to go out and find.

To me, because [Sharni's] character is supposed to be tough and badass, I wanted to find somebody who wasn't going to show up to the audition and pretend to be a badass. I wanted to find somebody who just was. I feel like that's the same with every role; you just want to find someone who's already 75% that. With Sharni, it was instantaneous. She came in, she read, and we'd just seen all these girls come in and read with low-cut

shirts, Daisy Dukes, playing the role too much from their femininity. Sharni is a beautiful girl, obviously, but she doesn't have to prove that to you. She doesn't have to throw it in your face, and she doesn't have to throw in your face that she can also kick your ass. She has a very distinctive physical background in dancing, so she's uniquely suited for physicality. Not to mention there's a thing about people from Australia that seems tougher anyway: it's hotter there, the bugs are bigger, everything is poisonous. It seems like if you came from the Outback, you had to survive. There were a lot of factors that came into play. But we lucked out, because it wasn't like Sharni ever played this type of character before so that we could just look at her reel and be like, "Oh, perfect! Yeah! Let's hire her!" It was kind of scary, but it worked out great.

DIABOLIQUE: *You're Next* feels consciously different than your mumblecore projects from the past. How different did the film turn out from the original concept? Did the attitude on set lend itself more to improvisation?

AW: It's hard to say. I know that when I first visualized the film, it was a totally different thing. But at the same time, it wasn't drastically different in the way that *A Horrible Way to Die* was, where I was forced to work within budgetary constraints to get the movie made. In *You're Next*'s case, it was a tonal thing. It ended up being funnier than I originally intended, and that's mainly because of the cast we got. They're very likeable, funny people and they brought out the best of that. Those elements are some things that you can't imagine, like the way actors come up with something on the spot. [Joe] Swanberg did a lot of stuff like that. The movie really evolved progressively as it was being filmed.

I didn't imagine that the house the whole movie takes place in being in a modern style. I wanted more of a Frank Lloyd Wright rip-off house; something that was really weird. But ultimately, what we got was better and more appropriate, and the reason we ended up with it was

because it was the best option that we had available to us. That ended up dictating the color palette of the film, so then things automatically were going to change—and then, your whole cast, each one is going to bring something so uniquely to the film than what was on the page. Their personality is going to seep through. It's definitely the movie I set out to make—it's the closest to feeling like we've achieved what we set out for—but sometimes, it's not necessarily "sticking" to everything. That'd be kind of difficult in a natural light. **DIABOLIQUE:** Was there ever a question about *You're Next*'s content, in the sense that maybe, at times, you wanted to get a little more extreme with a certain kill or injury that later you decided against?

AW: I love gory movies. For me, my inspiration going into this was Donald Cammell's *White of the Eye*, from 1987. But that movie has some very unique stylistic kills. Going into this, I wanted to take a different route with the film. In *White of the Eye*, when someone's getting strangled, they'll do some ultra-micro-close-ups of their eyeballs and then they'll cut to them knocking over a vase of flowers, and the vase will explode in slow motion. It's ridiculously artsy violence while still remaining effective. That inspired me to find interesting ways to film violence. There was a scene in the film that was originally in the script as a golf club murder. Somebody was going to get repeatedly bashed with a golf club, and I was going to do all these inserts of the club going in the air after each hit, covered in blood, and it'd sling blood across the room, and you'd see it paint the walls and paint the family portraits in slow motion. I'd be just completely indulging in this violent act. But sometimes, you literally don't have the time to do something like that, so you have to compromise. In this case, instead of a golf club it was an axe, which, gore-wise, didn't make it any less violent. It just made it less gratuitous to a certain degree because instead of 8 hits, it became one bloody axe hit. So there was never anything where it was like, "I want

to take it further. Why won't someone let me make this more gory?" or something like that. If anything, that was the only situation where it was like, "We basically don't have time to pull this off and it's just not going to look as good with a golf club, so let's try to think of something more expedient to get this done."

DIABOLIQUE: It'd be the difference between filming someone getting stabbed to death with a pencil rather than a steak knife.

AW: Yeah. I should mention that the reason for that is because, to me, any time that we have graphic violence, we're actually showing it, and not relying on CGI ever. That becomes a challenge in itself; to get all the correct inserts and the viscera that we needed, we ended up having to do pick-ups every day. There's a really violent scene in the beginning of the film that involves a character's throat, and to get all the proper coverage of that, we shot inserts for five or six days, so it felt like every day we were doing pick-ups of something just to keep up. It adds a lot to our workload, but it was worth it in the long run because it stands out in its own right. People have become so lazy when it comes to effects—rightfully so, too, because it is a pain in the ass.

DIABOLIQUE: *You're Next* wears many different hats, sometimes playing as straight horror, other times playing as a family drama or a dark comedy. Did you attempt to use these tonal shifts as a weapon of misdirection?

AW: The tonal shifts happened very gradually throughout the film, so it really was a natural thing. The movie was actually a little more funny and dialogue driven initially, but it slowly changes from that, and the violent threat is a little more intimidating and scary at the beginning of the film. Ultimately, we wanted the film to have a really fun, audience-engaging immersion to it. So as the film goes, we kind of wanted to let you in on the joke a little bit more without winking at you. It's a matter of finding ways for the movie to progress to something different as it goes. In the beginning of the film, the violence

is much more serious, but by the end of the film, while it's still painful looking and the characters take the violence seriously, it does get progressively over the top. To cue that, one of the things was finding ways for the musical score to go from ominous to '80s synthesizers. It was just a part of the plot, in that it kind of organically happened. Some of that was through editing—a conscious choice.

DIABOLIQUE: You've gone on record in the past as saying you'd like to mix up your films in the future. Do you expect to stay embedded in the horror community?

AW: Everything I do is going to have an aspect of horror. It's going to fluctuate between being a thriller and *A Horrible Way to Die* kinds of things, and then things, like *You're Next*, that are straight-up genre entertainment. There's no way to really predict what moods you're going to be in when you're doing every movie. I want to be responsible to the people watching my films, and deliver something not necessarily what they're expecting, but something that satisfies people interested in my work, whoever the hell they are. Sometimes you have to go where the wind takes you, and you have to be true to yourself. While I don't think I'm going to do anything extreme anytime soon, like a romantic comedy, the next thing I'm going to do will probably be thriller-oriented. But I'm still going to be playing off the movies that inspired me, which are horror movies, to be honest.

by Ken Hanley



The Strange, Supernatural World of Akiko Stehrenberger

RAISED BY FEAR

YOU MAY NOT know who Akiko Stehrenberger is, but chances are good you've seen at least one of her film posters. Stehrenberger is the artist behind the posters for Michael Haneke's *Funny Games*; Rodney Ascher's *Room 237*; Lynne Ramsey's *We Need to Talk About Kevin*; Xan Cassavetes's *Kiss of the Damned*; Astron-6's *Father's Day*, and many, many more. Stehrenberger is a lot like readers of *Diabolique*, in that she's obsessed with Halloween and all things spooky. However, having grown up in a haunted house, the artist has had more direct contact with the more mysterious side of our world than most.

A traditional illustrator, Stehrenberger eschewed creating art digitally until relatively recently, when her co-workers at a Los Angeles design shop helped bring her into the modern world of poster art with tools like Illustrator, Photoshop, and MACs. Like the poster illustrators of the '60s and '70s she admires, Stehrenberger preferred to work with actual brushes and paint. Top movie poster illustrators like Bob Peaks (*Kaleidoscope*, *Camelot*, *Apocalypse Now*, *My Fair Lady*), Ted Coconis (*Dorian Gray*, *Labyrinth*, *Fiddler on the Roof*, *Man of La Mancha*) and C. Michael Dudash (*Pale Rider*, *Silverado*, *Casablanca*, *It's a Wonderful Life*) have influenced her work.

Having been born into an artistic family, it was only natural that Stehrenberger follow suit, but here's where it gets interesting: she swears to have grown up in a house filled with bizarre supernatural occurrences. According to Stehrenberger, dim orbs would float in circles in her room; electronics would turn on without being touched by human hands; non-functioning intercoms (wires had been cut) would

come alive in the middle of the night; and both the TV and synthesizer would turn on randomly. Creepier things would happen, too. There would be sounds of invisible children running down the hallway. The family cats hissed at corners, and the ghost of an old lady constantly appeared in Stehrenberger's brother's room. Her mother experienced seeing a veritable army's worth of shadows, and Stehrenberger herself was continually menaced by one of those shadows in her doorway. A psychic contacted by her aunt revealed that a man murdered his wife on the property, before the house was rebuilt.

"This makes me sound like a total nut," Stehrenberger admits. "But a lot of stuff happened and I wrote it off as being an imaginative young kid. My dad also explained everything as 'an electrical problem.' White people never believe in ghosts. It wasn't until maybe a decade ago I spoke of these stories, and my very logical, 'science-proves-everything' big brother turned white because some of my stories matched up with his."

To this day, Stehrenberger sleeps with her door shut.

Some little girls would have taken refuge in Disney movies, but not this one. Stehrenberger began renting horror films from a very early age, including once when she wasn't particularly well-supervised: "I remember sleeping over at my uncle's house and he let my little brother and me go down the street to rent a video," she recalls. "He probably thought we'd rent a Bruce Lee film, but instead I grabbed *Faces of Death*. I was probably seven or eight, and my poor brother was five or six. Hopefully he was too young to remember, because that could have scarred him for life."

No doubt. It seems that Stehrenberger's early life events aligned like a macabre set of dominos, beginning with the



bizarre hauntings that she and her family endured, which led to her horror film obsession; both were channeled into her artwork, culminating into the posters she illustrates for top studios, obscure films, and auteur directors - the weirder, the better. Stehrenberger was an editorial illustrator in New York before moving to Los Angeles, where she took a job as a receptionist in a movie poster ad shop. After a creative director noticed her work in *Spin* magazine, she scored a gig as a junior designer. "I had no idea how different my life would be from that point on," she muses. "I thought for sure I'd always be a starving artist."

Since then, nine years of designing, art directing, and illustrating posters have passed, and Stehrenberger's work is visible in movie theaters, on DVD sleeves, and even IMDB. Unlike most artists, you won't find her working in one style, but several - from head-turning photorealism to *Yellow Submarine*-like, '60s-inspired line drawings and bright colors, to ghostly, painterly transparencies and images within images ala Austrian symbolist artist Gustav Klimt.

"When I was illustrating for maga-

zines, it was important to maintain consistency to establish myself as an illustrator," Stehrenberger says. "However, when I started making movie posters, per genre, concept and style became as important as imagery. I soon realized that the style of execution can communicate as much as the actual image. It's important to determine what look is most appropriate for the genre, and not just do something cool for cool sake. As much as I would love to push my own personal style, I think the look has to fit, or else I'm marketing myself and not the film. I don't want to be a one trick pony, and it constantly challenges me to illustrate differently and keep growing. I would like to think that despite the variety, I still maintain a common point of view in my work."

Accordingly, Stehrenberger looks at each project through the eyes of an art director first, and determines which look is most appropriate for the genre in which she'll be working. For instance, her poster for Madonna's *W.E.* was created in a post-Cubist style that corresponded to the 1930s period in which the film is set. Her recently released *Kiss of the Damned* poster will be on the film's Blu-Ray release, and not only similarly recalls the work Klimt, but also shares the sense of a weird, trippy, sexy romp full of sin and devilish glee inherent in the classic Ted Coconis-painted poster for the 1970 film, *Dorian Gray*.

As for the actual process of creating concepts for the posters she designs and illustrates, Stehrenberger can be brought in at any stage. "Sometimes I get rough cut screeners, sometimes scripts, sometimes a trailer, or sometimes just a two-line synopsis! Sometimes I really do have to make something from absolutely nothing. From this point, I do research and look at inspiration to come up with concepts based on the assets I have. With zero assets, which is not uncommon, that's when my illustration skills really come

in handy. I usually spend a solid day coming up with concepts, run them by my creative director, then depending on what gets the green light, I go for it. I've been really privileged to get to a point where my favorite creative directors put a lot of trust in me to do my thing without having to see every step of the way."

Naturally, Stehrenberger favors independent and horror films over other genres. She treasures the poster of Naomi Watts she created for *Funny Games*, which most people mistake for a photograph. A big fan of Todd Solondz, she was excited to work on *Life During Wartime*. She was equally as psyched to create the creepy, '80s-retro poster for *Father's Day*, "Because I love the campiness of Troma. Adam from Astron-6 was probably one of the best clients I've had. He's also an amazing painter, so it kept me on my toes."

Yet another honor for Stehrenberger was working on an artist series for the Blu-ray releases of David Lynch's *Lost Highway* and Michael Haneke's *Code Unknown* - quite a long way from a self-diagnosed starving artist. Then again, the works of such prolific provocateurs as Haneke and Lynch seem

"I think all my close friends know that although I look like a school teacher, I can go to some really dark places."



tailor made to be marketed by Stehrenberger's unique sensibilities: "I think all my close friends know that although I look like a school teacher, I can go to some really dark places," she quips.

But what makes Stehrenberger happiest about her career? "I am so happy to do the work I do. [And] to get awards on top of it is just amazing. I consciously make choices to work on projects that appeal to me, and not necessarily to the masses. I know that most of my posters are for films most people won't ever see. But when I get awards or design magazines feature my stuff, it lets me know my audience isn't as small as I think."

by Michele "Izzy" Galgana



CANADIAN WITH A CAMERA

From killer Christmas trees to extraterrestrial kidnappers, Jason Eisener lets his inner-child run wild.



IMAGINATION IS A curious aspect of the human mind, partially because of how much it weaves our inspirations into our own creations and ideas. Even more curious is to see the surplus of imagination that seeps into the films of directors who grew up during the cinematic renaissance of the 1970s and 80s. With the application of groundbreaking special effects, pulp-inspired cinematography and imaginative twists on burnt-out concepts on their brains, an aura of childlike wonder often seeps through the work of filmmakers inspired by the films of Steven Spielberg, Joe Dante and George A. Romero. However, when at a loss for budgets that endow more experienced filmmakers such as J.J. Abrams, Zack Snyder and Bryan Singer, imagination becomes a crucial tool, guiding a production through a determined will to bring those inspired ideas to reality.

It is through these conditions that Jason Eisener has shown defied expectations, proving with his small body of work that he can bring insane, revisionist concepts to the independent arena. With his aptly-titled "Slumber Party Alien Abduction" segment in *V/H/S/2*, Eisener takes the storytelling conventions of Amblin Entertainment and applies them to the independent found footage subgenre, to produce something genuinely scary and wickedly funny, but also incredibly real. By looking at his previous work, mostly comprised of short films and his cult smash *Hobo with a Shotgun*, you'd be hard-pressed to find someone who could have logically drawn Eisener's trajectory from his *Grindhouse* trailer contest win to directing alongside the filmmakers behind *The Blair Witch Project*, A

Horrible Way to Die and *The Raid: Redemption*. And yet, Eisener's place in the independent genre film community is completely deserved; his work speaks volumes about his passion, innovation and devotion to the dark humor and absolute madness his films entail.

Eisener, a native of Dartmouth, Nova Scotia, rocketed onto the radars of the genre community at large at the South by Southwest Festival in 2007, where his conceptual trailer for *Hobo with a Shotgun* turned both heads and stomachs, winning a place in the Canadian release of the Robert Rodriguez/Quentin Tarantino double feature *Grindhouse*. However, according to the director himself, the decision to finally make the trailer was somewhat circumstantial, as the concepts of exploitation films of the past incidentally posed a gainful opportunity.

"I always love cinema that's so crazy that you can't believe that the filmmakers went there, or that they got away with going there," says Eisener. "Those high concept ideas would usually come from exploitation, 'grindhouse'-style movies. So when I became a teenager, looking for things to feed my appetite, I'd always go to those exploitation movies because they'd be filled with outrageous ideas, and [they] got away with things that you wouldn't see in mainstream movies."

"Around that time, I remember there was another contest by Spielberg called 'On The Lot', and we were thinking of making something for that contest," explains Eisener. "But a couple days

later, the *Grindhouse* competition came up on *Ain't It Cool News*, and we were like, "This is perfect for us." The night of [learning about the contest], we started shooting [the fake trailer for *Hobo*]. We were so excited."

Eisener continues: "That whole experience was amazing. I'd never really seen anything quite like it before, where all these filmmakers from around the world jumped in on it and made trailers. I became friends with a lot of those filmmakers, and when *Hobo* finally won, that was just mind-blowing. I'm sure there's footage out there of me when we won at South by Southwest, sitting on a panel with Robert Rodriguez where I'm batshit scared and nervous."

After the *Hobo* faux-trailer's stellar reception, as well as rumors swirling around of the fake trailers attached to *Grindhouse*, Eisener took advantage of his new-found notoriety and began planning a *Hobo* feature. But before embarking on his first solo directorial feature film, he decided to tackle one more short: the 16-minute



"I ALWAYS LOVE CINEMA THAT'S SO CRAZY THAT YOU CAN'T BELIEVE THAT THE FILMMAKERS WENT THERE, OR THAT THEY GOT AWAY WITH GOING THERE."

Treevenge, in which Christmas trees decide to fight back against their captors. For the burgeoning director, *Treevenge* served not only as a crucial learning experience, but as a silencer for those who dismissed the initial *Hobo* trailer as a happy accident of grindhouse fandom.

ing on it. I had stresses like, 'Oh we've got to get the costumes ready. We've got to make sure all the effects are ready.' Then I realized, 'No, we've got departments for this. They're handling it.'"

"I don't think *Treevenge* would really

tors to play the role. I thought the whole process was ridiculous, and I put Rutger Hauer at the top, thinking, 'There's no way in hell this will ever happen. Let's get this whole process over with really quickly.' Sure enough, [Hauer] was down to do it, which blew my mind and made me very nervous before shooting the film. But working with him was such a pleasure, and I honestly couldn't have had a better experience with a well-experienced actor on a first-time feature film. I still look back at it like, 'Who the hell was I when that happened?' It feels like this weird dream."

Hobo with a Shotgun, now a full-fledged feature film starring Hauer, as well as *Trailer Park Boys'* Robb Wells and Eisener regulars Molly Dunsworth and David Brunt, debuted at the 2011 Sundance Film Festival under the new genre-friendly "Park City at Midnight" banner. *Hobo* tells the story of a nameless vagrant who takes justice into his own dirty hands when Hope Town runs rampant with corruption and crime. *Hobo* brilliantly attempts to go farther than initially expected, creating a living, breathing world populated by the seedy and the righteous as polarized opposites, and which Eisener hopes to return to again.

"We spent three or four years developing that movie and creating the world of *Hobo with a Shotgun*, and to spend that much time creating a whole world, it sucks to make only one film out of it," laments Eisener. "I would love to revisit that world. I would make a *Hobo 2*. We just finished the fourth draft on a movie based on the two bounty hunters in the film, called *The Plague*. But it's very ambitious, and very crazy, so I imagine it will take a long time before somebody gives us the money to make that film. Hopefully not. We'll see."

Following *Hobo with a Shotgun's* release, Eisener made a surprising turn, embracing his independent spirit in the face of Hollywood directing gigs and taking on a segment in Drafthouse Films' *The ABCs of Death*. Initially offered the letter

"I DON'T THINK TREEVENGE WOULD REALLY WORK AS A FEATURE FILM. I DON'T KNOW IF I COULD STAND TO WATCH A FULL-LENGTH MOVIE ABOUT CHRISTMAS TREES FIGHTING BACK."

"N" for the 26-part death-obsessed anthology film, Eisener developed a short based on hairdressers who fought to the death with nunchucks before scrapping that idea for something less-dialogue driven. Refusing to let criticisms about his visual palette and storytelling strong suits dictate his career path, Eisener instead focused on where his filmmaking intuition would lead him. The end result was "Y is for Young Buck", formerly titled "N is for Nature", which allowed Eisener to briefly dip back into the world of *Hobo* for a silent piece about revenge.

"I wasn't afraid of [being written off] at all because we spent so much time building up that *Hobo* world. 'Young Buck' actually takes place in the same world as *Hobo*," Eisener notes. "The school that [the short] takes place in that has a sign that says 'Hope Town Junior High', and Timothy Dunn, who played the Pawn Shop Clerk in *Hobo*, is back as The Janitor. I feel that he's kind of the same character. For me, the challenge was that everything I wanted to do before was done with crazy, heavy, ridiculous dialogue, so I wanted to do something just stripped of all the dialogue and have none whatsoever. [The *ABCs of Death*] is a film from 26 filmmakers from around the world, so I thought it'd be cool to make a film that could play universally, in all of the filmmakers' countries."

Following his memorable piece in *ABCs*, Eisener was approached by The Collective to contribute an entry to *V/H/S/2*. With a larger budget than *ABCs*, Eisener had wiggle room to approach more fantastical storytelling elements. Still, he was not yet completely sold on the found footage concept, as he was rightfully wary from the Hollywood releases exploiting that format. Eventually, Eisener's imagination got the best of him; he opted to indulge in a former childhood nightmare

that he could now share with the world in the first-person perspective.

"When they first pitched me the idea of doing a found footage short, I wasn't really too fond of what I'd been seeing coming out of that genre," shares Eisener. "But then they showed me the first *V/H/S*, and I was blown away by how they flipped [the genre]. They picked perspectives that I hadn't really seen before in found footage. I thought that was really exciting and fresh, so I was thinking, 'What can I do that I would be really excited about doing?'"

"I'd always wanted to make a serious kids movie, and I'd always wanted to make an animal perspective movie," he continues. "I love the *Babe* films, especially *Babe: Pig in the City*, and [Jean-Jacques Annaud's] *The Bear*. The way 'Slumber Party

of John and I tormenting my older sister growing up. That's where the inspiration came from."

"Also, when I was a kid, I saw *Fire in the Sky*, and that movie ruined my childhood for a couple of years. I had to keep a baseball bat under my bed after seeing it!" exclaims Eisener. "So I based [the segment] off the childhood nightmares I would have. A lot of my nightmares were that aliens would come to abduct me and my family and friends, and there'd be no time to think. I would just have to run. I'd have these dreams of just running in my parent's backyard, trying to run to my neighbor's house and aliens were always in the distance, trying to come for us."

Keeping in line with the director's penchant for punctuality, "Slum-

"[At the time], we were pitching *Hobo with a Shotgun* as a feature, and we were like, 'We've gotta do something that shows people that we can do more than just the three minute trailer that we put out,'" says Eisener. "On all the shorts we made before *Treevenge*, I'd be camera operating; color correcting; doing costumes; doing effects; making music; editing; doing the sound, etc. *Treevenge* was the first time we had a small crew of people working on one of our films. And my producing partner, Rob Cotterill, was like, 'I want to create an environment similar to what you would have on a feature film.' So he forced me to step away from the camera and direct from behind a monitor, which was very difficult for me because I'd never given camera direction before."

"If I didn't make *Treevenge* before going into *Hobo*, it would have been a messy situation," adds Eisener. "Even going into *Hobo*, I still had those jitters. The scariest time when working on *Hobo* was pre-production. I really didn't know what to expect, going into *Hobo* with 40 people work-

work as a feature film. I always thought that it would work as a really good short film," Eisener confesses. "I don't know if I could stand to watch a full length movie about Christmas trees fighting back. But it really prepared me [as a director]."

Debuting in the summer of 2008, *Treevenge* took the festival circuit by storm, claiming audience awards at Fantasia Film Festival, Toronto After Dark Film Festival, NYC Horror Film Festival and the San Francisco Independent Film Festival, as well as an honorable mention from Sundance Film Festival and the Best Short Film awards from Fantastic Fest Online and *Rue Morgue* magazine. But most importantly, *Treevenge* paved the way for *Hobo with a Shotgun* to finally transition into the world of feature films.

This process included finding a proper leading man to play the titular Hobo - a step of the way which imbued Eisener with skepticism about landing the proper actor. "As a kid, my first favorite actor was Rutger Hauer. I tried tracking down all of his films," recalls Eisener. "I remember our distributor in Canada asked me to write my top 5 favorite ac-



Alien Abduction' started was that my writing partner, [*Hobo* scripter] John Davies, and I have known each other since he was five years old, and most of the moments [in 'Slumber Party Alien Abduction'] of the kids terrorizing the older sister were moments

ber Party Alien Abduction" is Eisener's most accessible film to date, and arguably his most innovative. Eisener uses



Eisener says. "I was able to work with the dog well because he knew who I was, even though he didn't want to listen all the time. I used him for about half of it, and then I got a hold of an old ALF doll. When my parents got the dog, I remember thinking, 'He looks like ALF!' So I grabbed my old ALF doll, and the hair on him was exactly the same, so

the found footage components to his advantage, employing in-camera tricks to keep the perspective consistently fresh, and to make his creatures all the more convincing. In addition, Eisener brings aboard the formula for an earnest kids' film; here, swearing, mischievous pre-teens (and their loyal dog) are observed by the camera's first person gaze as they pull pranks on one boy's older sister and her obnoxious boyfriend.

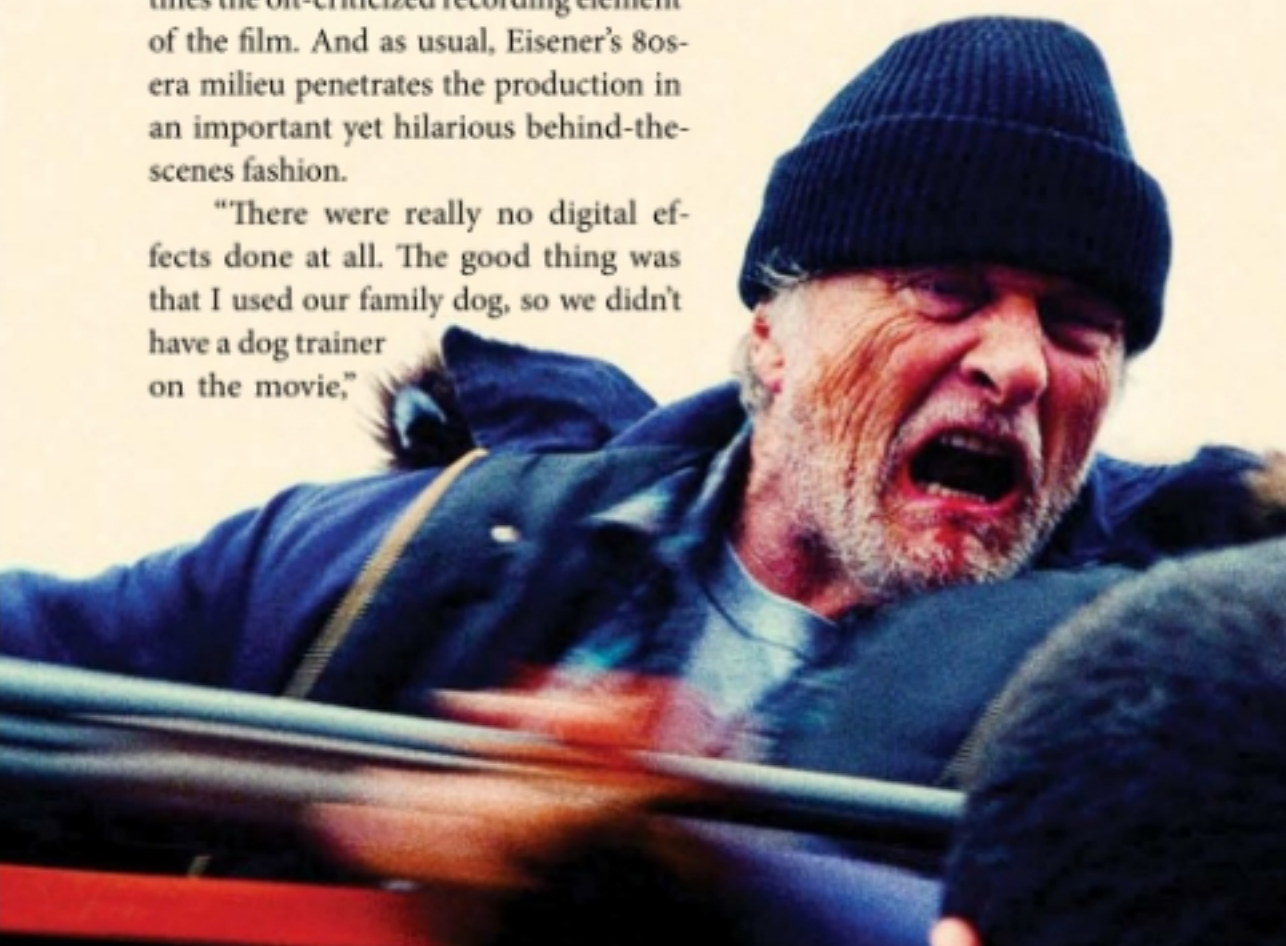
"Slumber Party Alien Abduction" is in the tradition of expertly made films about youth, which, in turn, makes the danger of an extraterrestrial threat only more concerning and emotional. Furthermore, most of the found footage comes through the perspective of a camera tied to the aforementioned terrier, which justifies the oft-criticized recording element of the film. And as usual, Eisener's 80s-era milieu penetrates the production in an important yet hilarious behind-the-scenes fashion.

"There were really no digital effects done at all. The good thing was that I used our family dog, so we didn't have a dog trainer on the movie,"

I feathered him out and used him as a puppet. That became the stunt dog for a lot of it as well. So, yeah, a lot of it was a puppet."

It's yet to be determined what new projects lie in store for Eisener's wonky directorial approach to tackle. Will he move to Hollywood to make the "ultimate tree fort movie" that he has yearned to make in the past? Will he stick closer to the low-budget scene, making films on his own terms ala his influences Walter Hill, John Carpenter and Fred Dekker? Or will Eisener return to the world of *Hobo with a Shotgun* to indulge in more deranged ferociousness? Only time will tell, but one thing's for sure: as long as Eisener's inspiration is there, his imagination will follow.

by Ken Hanley



FILM REVIEW

YOU'RE NEXT

FOLLOWING THE STAGGERING critical and commercial success of *The Strangers*, it's a shock that home invasion films never inhabited the hole within the horror community zeitgeist left by so-called "torture porn" and eventually filled by found footage. With scares mostly coming from the ominous threat of danger and death and lending itself to innovation in regards to kills, traps and motivation, the home invasion formula seems to be a no-brainer for repeat success. And yet it's not until 2013 that the horror community gets a fitting, if not stronger successor to *The Strangers* with Adam Wingard's *You're Next*, an absolutely frightening, shocking and unnerving experience that moves too quickly to allow you to get comfortable enough to define it.

When I learned of *You're Next* following its successful run at the Toronto International Film Festival in 2011, a friend described the film as "Thomas Vinterberg's *Festen*—but if people start killing the family after the first act." The statement may be apt, but it's fitting in the best way possible. Wingard establishes his world in a feasible reality early in the film, allowing family woes and romances to bloom as the larger threat slowly creeps into the story. At this point, Wingard flourishes with his quick-witted and darkly humorous repertoire, using misdirection with expertise until *You're Next*'s shocking introduction of its characters' dire straits. From there, Wingard is as relentless as the film's attackers themselves, reveling in madness and unpredictability through a wonderfully stylized voyeuristic viewpoint. *You're Next* is the real deal; it's unforgettably terrifying by encouraging the audience to place them-

selves in the shoes of the victims, and swipes away logical options with every fault and failure.

But even at this point, Wingard has yet to show his hand with the film. Working from a clever and haunting script from longtime collaborator Simon Barrett, Wingard never lets *You're Next* fall into a groove, and provides a cinematic counterpoint for every expectation that its previous scene had established. At heart, *You're Next* is a terrifying horror experience, unafraid to show its love for the films of genre past with incredible effects (almost all entirely on-screen) and a schizophrenic score that alternates between traditional compositions and inspired synthesized mood music. *You're Next*'s twists are effective and rarely predictable; as you become familiar with the film's direction, the film encourages you to lower your guard and have fun with it, rather than lay down and wait for the next scary moment.

Its great script, score, direction and Andrew Droz's appropriately glossy cinematography aside, *You're Next*'s effectiveness is also largely due to its great cast of genre character acting stalwarts. Indie horror golden boys AJ Bowen and Joe Swanberg do incredible work in *You're Next*, using their mumblecore roots to establish a genuine rapport and prove why the world outside of cult circles should know their names. Rob Moran and Barbara Crampton bring a level of gravitas to the proceedings that elevates every performance around them, which is even more impressive when considering they're being asked to portray seemingly normal, well-off characters. Some of the other performances are genuine and satisfactory, but too underserved by the rapid pace of the first act, including Amy Seimetz, Margaret Laney, Nicholas Tucci and Wingard contemporary Ti West, whose career

as a filmmaker is played for laughs.

The performance to watch in *You're Next* is from Sharni Vinson; she truly dominates the film once trouble erupts. Vinson is dynamite, delivering in both emotional and relatable moments throughout the film and causing you to root for her along the way. Despite Vinson's drop-dead gorgeousness, Wingard rightfully never oversexualizes her, and instead allows her to break down gender expectations as per horror tropes in order that she potentially launch herself into star status. There are few female performances in any film this year as empowering, vulnerable and definitively badass as Vinson's.

You're Next allows those with critical tendencies to indulge in its frenzied entertainment as anyone else would consume it—and at no fault of its own. The hardest films to analyze are those that you have no emotional allegiance to; words quickly escape when describing bland entertainment. *You're Next* is a film that the horror community needs—an old-school shock-and-awe horror film without the trappings of splatter gore or rehashed techniques—and it feels refreshingly new all the way until the finish line. Wingard throws down the gauntlet here, paving the way for more films with nostalgic aesthetics to take the throne of which they had once laid claim. And on top of that, it's a twisted and startling good time that will likely resonate with as many casual filmgoers as it will with the most hardcore of horror junkies. As a film critic, I give *You're Next* my highest recommendation, and as a simple horror fan, I can't wait to see it again.

by Ken Hanley



*We Love
Our Contributors!*



Nigel Wingrove founded Redemption Films in 1993, following the banning of his short film *Visions of Ecstasy* (1989) on the grounds of blasphemy. Salvation Films and the Redemption label, which were the first to champion the works of Jean Rollin, Jess Franco and European exploitation cinema, are now well established and widely distributed in the USA and UK, as well as online at www.salvation-films.com



Colin McCracken is an Irish freelance writer and critic. A lifelong obsession with the darker side of cinema and literature has culminated in an insatiable desire to write endlessly on the subject. His work appears in a multitude of genre publications and he can be found on his website zombiehamster.com with alarming regularity.



Ken Hanley is the Web Editor of *Diabolique* and a contributing writer for *Fangoria*. He is a graduate of Montclair State University, where he received an award for Excellence in Screenwriting. He is currently working on several screenplays spanning different genres and subject matter. Follow Ken on Twitter @movieguyiguess.



Michele "Izzy" Galgana is a freelance writer and film festival programmer. She has curated films for the Boston Underground Film Festival, Boston Science Fiction Film Festival, All Things Horror Online screening nights, and has written for *Rue Morgue* and *All Things Horror Online*.



Max Weinstein is a writer and film critic based in New Jersey. He is the Editor-in-Chief of *Diabolique*, and his words have appeared online and in print in *Boxoffice*, *Cineaste*, *Fangoria*, *MovieMaker*, *Scream* and *Screen Comment*. Follow Max on Twitter @maxlweinstein.

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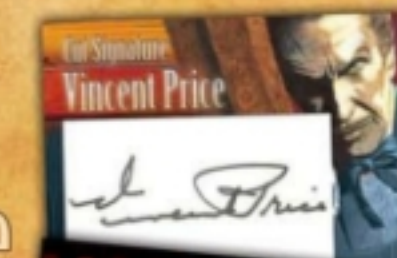
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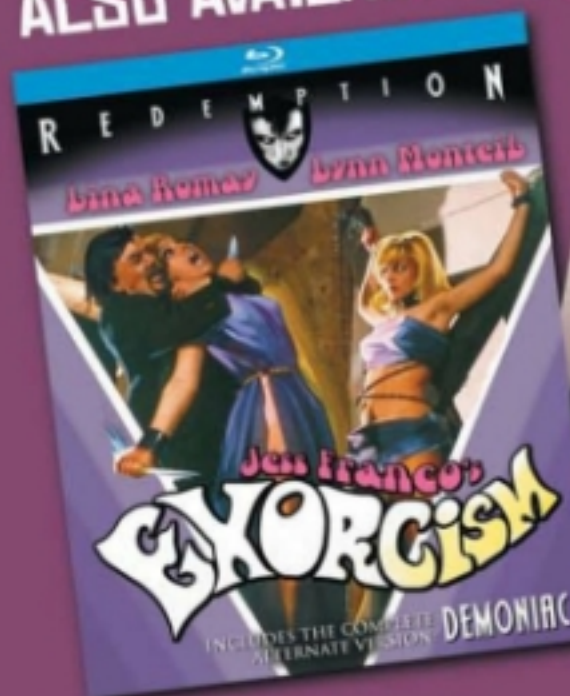


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